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THE LOST HUNTERS; Or, THE UNDERGROUND CAMP.

BY CAPTAIN J. F. C. ADAMS,

AUTHOR OF "BUCK BUCKRAM," "LIGHTNING JOE," "OLD ZIP'S CABIN," ETC., ETC.



"FOOLS! SEE WHAT YOU HAVE DONE! YOU HAVE GOT ME INSTEAD OF HIM!" AND DOWN, DOWN HE WENT SPINNING INTO THE LOST RIVER.

The Lost Hunters;

OR,
THE UNDERGROUND CAMP.

BY CAPTAIN J. F. C. ADAMS,
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RAM," "LIGHTNING JO," "OLD ZIP'S
CABIN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PROSPECTING PARTY.

"I TELL you, Wolcott, it's my opinion the best thing we can do is to turn our faces toward camp, and strike a bee-line for it."

"We are not far away, and can make it in a few hours. Our horses are still fresh, and we are sure of the bear."

"But, please to remember that we are in an infernal Indian country, and I don't fancy being gobbled up by some of these confounded Mohaves or Apaches. It will be dark in a couple of hours."

"There is no danger," laughed his companion. "If it becomes dark so soon, all the better. The red-skins won't be able to see us—"

"Nor we to see the camp-fire."

"It will shine like a beacon-light over the prairie and guide us unerringly to it."

"The mischief take you, Wolcott, there never was any reason in you. Go ahead and see where you will come out."

The two men who indulged in this brief conversation were mounted on black, fleet-footed mustangs, and were named respectively Holmes Wolcott and Peter Brown. The former was a prepossessing young man, a fine horseman, an excellent marksman, and a courageous, daring hunter, with a taste for perilous adventure, and was noted for his good-fortune in extricating himself from the most dangerous situations.

Peter Brown was known as "Puff," or "Puffy," among his acquaintances—rarely, if ever, being addressed by any other title. He was about five feet in height, and so corpulent that his girth was said to equal his circumference taken longitudinally.

Like all obese persons, he was genial and good-natured, a tolerable marksman and a favorite with all who knew him. So fleshy was he, that only a very slight exertion was necessary to cause him to "puff" like a laboring engine—from which circumstance he came by his title.

These two men were far down in south-eastern California, and the question at once occurs to the reader as to how they came to be in that dangerous locality, where the slight restraint of treaties is wanting to hold the ferocious Indian tribes in anything like submission.

Some weeks before, a party numbering a dozen men had been fitted out in San Francisco for the purpose of prospecting south-eastern California. There had been many rumors of precious metals existing there in abundance, and there undoubtedly was good reason to believe that both gold and silver were to be found in sufficient quantities to make it worth while to attempt an investigation.

A company of wealthy capitalists, therefore, organized a sort of expedition, and sent them into this region, prepared to make a thorough exploration, and a full report of the country and its resources.

The party was furnished with a Prussian, whose attainments in geology insured a full and correct report in that particular; a naturalist, and a clever artist, who was no less a personage than our friend Puffy Brown.

Instead of making their way through the wild passes of the Sierra Nevada, and the wilderness of rivers, canyons, lakes, swamps, gorges and deserts, exposed to the treacherous assaults of mountain Indians, and the prospect of being overwhelmed by storms and freshets—the company had quietly sailed down the coast, through the channel of Santa Barbara, and up the San Pedro, to that wonderful little town of Los Angeles, or City of the Angels, where they properly began their land journey.

The stanch craft that had so safely brought them this distance, was left at the quaint old Spanish town, with instructions to await their return, be it within a week or for ten times as long.

They managed to cross the southern portion of the coast range without difficulty, and then found themselves in the wild desert region on the other side, where they intended to make their explorations.

For several days they encountered shaggy and dangerous looking mares, straggling along

from their fruitless hunt for gold, and sullen and quarrelsome to all whom they met.

These, however, were soon lost sight of, and they began their labors.

As this part of the expedition is more interesting to the projectors than to our readers, we will pass it over in order to reach a series of events of a far different character, and of which no member of the expedition had any conception, at the time of entering this desolate region.

The party had penetrated something over a hundred miles into the interior, and had been absent from Los Angeles about a week at the time we introduce two of the characters to our readers.

The observations had been faithfully taken, the conclusions reached, and the decisions made to return, when it was resolved to go into camp for a few days, for the purpose of engaging in a hunt preparatory to their return home again.

There had been considerable success, and all would have gone merrily but for the discovery that the savage Mohaves were constantly on the look-out for a chance to do them injury.

Indeed, one of their men was shot and scalped within a few hundred yards of camp one night, and two of the others wounded.

Such was the condition of affairs at the time we find Puffy Brown and Holmes Wolcott wandering just at nightfall a few miles from camp, the former anxious to return, and the latter desirous of pressing on some time longer.

After Wolcott had carried his point, they rode along some time, without referring to the matter under dispute, and both peering forward in the gloom, in quest of the grizzly bear, that they had already fired at a dozen times, and which they believed there was a good prospect of securing.

By this time, it was quite dark, and the faint moon in the sky only made the surrounding desolation the more impressive. The huge bear was less than a quarter of a mile distant when the gathering gloom shut him out from view for the time.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Wolcott, in great excitement, as he caught the dim outlines of a dark mass, moving swiftly over the ground.

"Where?" demanded Puffy, staring in every direction but the right one.

"There! there! quick! or he will escape us!" replied our hero, striking his mustang into a swift gallop, and pointing off to the left.

Following the direction indicated, Puffy dimly saw the royal game, and his animal scenting the brute at the same time, pricked up his ears, snuffed the air, and partook of the excitement of his rider.

Crack, bang! went the rifle of Holmes, as he approached near his prize, and turning in the saddle, he swung his arm aloft and shouted to his companion:

"I've hit him, Puff! Hurry up and put in a shot too."

"What's the use?" growled the latter, as he bounced along. "That animal must have something less than a ton of lead in him, and he don't seem to mind it a bit."

Wolcott, not heeding the murmuring of his friend, bent all his energies upon securing the grizzly that now seemed in his grasp. He was sure he saw him limp as he moved along, and was confident that he could not hold out much longer.

But, if the bear was lame he had a wonderful facility of movement, and got over the ground with a most astonishing rate of speed. Holmes spurred his mustang forward as soon as he could reload his piece, with the purpose of giving him the finishing touch; but the sagacious animal was shy of the brute, and had no desire to permit himself to get within the power of those terrible claws.

The horse, therefore, bounded forward until he was within a couple of rods of the beast, but no amount of urging would lesson the distance. He kept his keen eyes upon the formidable forest king, ready to wheel about and show his heels whenever he turned to rend the enemy who was tormenting him so grievously.

This sagacious obstinacy upon the part of the mustang prevented his rider from securing the shot that was intended to wind up the business. Wolcott, consequently, was compelled to fire from the rear, aiming at the head of the bear, little hoping that he would thus be enabled to inflict a mortal wound.

When the rifle cracked again, he knew that the bullet had struck, for the brute reared himself upon his haunches, and attempted to claw out what he evidently believed were only smarting splinters that were thrust in him.

"Puff! Puff! where are you?" demanded Holmes Wolcott, somewhat impatiently; "why don't you fire, too?"

"Haven't I been shooting for half the afternoon?" demanded Puff, "and what's the result? Grizzly bears are gotten up to absorb bullets, just as a sponge absorbs water. I want to go home."

"Give him another while I am reloading. See if you can't get your horse a little nearer than mine will go. Blaze away, while you've got the chance."

Puff did blaze away as requested, but his bullet went wide of the mark, and the bear paid no heed to it. It began to look, after all, as if he were doomed to give them the slip.

The hunters were still pressing forward, when Puff suddenly exclaimed:

"Hark!"

Wolcott impatiently reined up for an instant, and demanded:

"What is it?"

"I hear the roar of water, as sure as you live."

"What of it?"

"It proves that we are a blamed sight further from camp than you think, and we had better turn about before it is too late."

"Come on; we'll get him sure *this* time," called out the young hunter, as he dashed forward again.

"I believe you'd follow that *ursa major* all the way to Santa Fé, if he would only keep on traveling," growled the artist, as he resignedly struck into a gallop after his young and enthusiastic friend.

Puff had not been mistaken in the supposition that he heard the sound of flowing water. It was distinctly audible to Wolcott, and grew louder and louder the further he progressed, proving conclusively that he was rapidly nearing some stream.

This confirmed the suspicion of Puff also, that they were further away from the camp than they had ever been before; for none of the party had discovered anything like a stream in the vicinity.

But it incited strong hopes of securing the bear, as it seemed that the current interposed directly across the path, and by bringing the animal to bay, would secure the shot for which the hunter was so impatiently striving.

Suddenly, in the dim moonlight, Wolcott caught the glimmer of water, and heard its flow in a louder tone than before.

By this time his piece was reloaded, and he pressed cautiously forward, awaiting the moment when the brute would halt and expose the vital spot to a shot from his piece.

Now the bear reaches the river—he halts, and as the mustang slackens his speed, the hunter cautiously takes his piece in hand and holds it ready for the mortal discharge.

But look! the bear does not pause for more than a moment. He looks at the water and then plunges in, and the next second nothing but his huge, pig-like snout is visible, as he strikes out into the current, and swims rapidly away.

Wolcott is beside himself with chagrin and indignation. He sends his parting shot after the brute, and reins up with the hoofs of his mustang on the very edge of the water.

"Was there ever anything so provoking?" he demanded, as Puff came up alongside of him.

"I was sure—absolutely sure of that bear, and now he is gone utterly and irretrievably."

"I don't see what could make you feel sure of him, after all our shooting at him. If that grizzly bear isn't iron-plated, he is just the thing to sit up in front of a French *mitraileur* and grin at them as they worked it."

"Every animal has a vulnerable point. You know Achilles was killed by being wounded in the heel, and you can fetch an alligator by planking a bullet in his eye, or just behind the foreleg. But, what's the use of talking? That grizzly is gone, and there's no telling when I will get as good a chance at another. Shall we go back to camp?"

"What direction shall we take?" asked Puff, in a low, significant voice. "I don't see the glimmer of the camp-fire; perhaps *you* do."

"No; I don't, and haven't the least idea of the direction to pursue to reach it," frankly admitted Wolcott, as he looked up at the faintly-lit sky and failed to see any stars by which he could guide his course.

"What's to be done?"

"We have ridden our horses pretty hard, and I suppose we shall have to camp out tonight."

"Do you think this place is suitable?"

"Of course not; we will ride down the bank

of the river until we find some suitable spot and then turn in for the night."

This suggestion was acted upon at once, although each felt that there was very little prospect of their securing any thing like a suitable place either for their animals or themselves.

Close to the edge of the river grew some green grass, which answered very well for food for their beasts, but in case of the approach of a foe, either human or animal, their line of retreat would be cut off, and they would be placed at the mercy of whatever chose to come down upon them.

They had ridden perhaps a couple of hundred yards in this manner, when Puff, who had been carefully scrutinizing the opposite bank of the river, drew a great sigh expressive of wonder amounting to consternation.

"What now?" demanded the annoyed Wolcott.

"Just look there! it is the strangest thing that I ever heard of in all my life!" he added, pointing out upon the river.

CHAPTER II.

A FEARFUL CATASTROPHE.

WOLCOTT gazed in the direction indicated by his companion and replied:

"I see nothing wonderful; to what do you allude?"

"Please to look at the opposite bank of the river."

"I am doing so," was the reply, as the young man obeyed, "and it all appears natural enough."

"Now look down-stream, for a hundred yards or so."

Wolcott endeavored to obey, rubbed his eyes, looked again and muttered:

"By Jove! what does it mean? There isn't any down-stream to look at. It ends yonder."

True; in every direction in which they looked (excepting up-stream, as a matter of course) they saw nothing but a high, precipitous bank of the river itself. It was entirely walled in!

This extraordinary fact so impressed the two young men that they determined to investigate it further; consequently with slow steps, like men who stand in the presence of something almost supernatural in its impressiveness, they walked their horses along the edge of the river.

As they advanced, they became conscious of a dull subterranean roar, not deafening but something like the far-off rumbling of the ocean.

The light of the moon was just sufficient for them to discover the mystery of the river.

Common sense taught them that such a body of water must have some outflow, and they found as they suspected, that it disappeared underground.

At the point where the river vanished, it was about a hundred yards in width. Flowing forward with a smooth, calm motion, the surface suddenly became rippled, as is generally the case at the foot of a series of rapids or falls, and then it plunged out of sight in the black, Titan-like cavernous opening that was capable of swallowing double the volume of water.

Dismounting from their horses, the two walked rather gingerly over the ground, which they knew was the roof of a subterranean river.

Stamping upon the ground, a dull hollow sound betrayed the treacherous footing, while by walking away a distance and applying their ear to the earth, they could plainly hear the rumble and flow of water far under the ground, as the river sped onward to its unknown destination.

"You have heard of *lost rivers*," remarked Puff, when they had stood for a few moments in silence.

"I know they exist in Southern Africa," was the reply, "where they are gradually absorbed in the burning sand, and dried up by evaporation, but I never heard of anything like this."

"There are well-authenticated reports of more than one such stream as this. Not only in California, but in some parts of the Territories, are rivers which are said to dip beneath the surface, and, after flowing perhaps for several miles, come to the upper world again and flow on like ordinary rivers in their course to the sea."

"Then it may be possible that this stream comes to view again?"

"It may and it may not. If we have time, I should like to make a sketch of this scene by daylight; but the night is advancing, and it is time we hunted up a camping-site."

They were about to move away, to where

their well-trained horses were awaiting them, when the observant artist discovered something else.

"Isn't something coming down-stream?"

"Yes, there certainly is; it looks like a large boat, with men in it."

"Men who are smoking," added Puff; "don't you see the glimmer of their pipes?"

"They must be white men who are unaware of their danger. Let us signal to them."

"Hold on! not so fast. In the first place, they are not white men; they are in no danger at all."

"How do you know that?"

"It's impossible that they should not know of the peculiarity of this stream, and venturing out in it, as they have done, they must feel certain that there is nothing to fear."

"But will they not see us?"

"That is something more likely. As we can plainly observe them, it is more than likely that they have already discovered us."

"Let us lie down on our faces and watch them as they make their subterranean trip."

This involved no little personal danger, but Puff was quite willing, and the two crawled forward until they reached the edge of the bank that overhung the river at the point of its disappearance.

By this time the Indian canoe was so close at hand that its inmates could be counted. They were found to be four in number, three of whom were smoking their pipes—the fourth looking more diminutive than the others, and sitting perfectly motionless in the stern.

The boat was not directly beneath the two men who were attentively watching it, but was a rod or two to the left, where the inmates were in a good position to be seen.

It seems hardly possible that the Indians should have failed to see the two white men, who, standing on the high bank, must have been brought out in bold relief against the dimly-lit sky beyond.

Such being the case, it seems strange that they paid no heed to them. Wolcott probably conjectured the true cause of their "masterly inactivity," when he laid it to the fact that at this precise time they were not masters of their own movements.

Like the doomed man who approaches Niagara too close, there was no drawing back now that they were in the grasp of the current, and conscious that they must pass close under the guns of the whites, they chose not to excite their exasperation by firing the first shot at their natural enemies.

And so, silently and swiftly, the Indian canoe shot out of sight and vanished from view, drawn forward by the powerful current of this stream—one of mysterious *lost rivers* of the West.

The two men remained silent a moment, and then rose to their feet and moved away to where their horses still awaited them.

"Now," said Puff, who seemed in quite exuberant spirits, "the style in which those red-men entered the underground river shows that they expect to come out again, and you can see as well as I that they can't come out the way they went in."

"Then the river must come to the surface again."

"I think their action establishes that much; furthermore, it can be at no great distance away—probably only a few miles."

Wolcott made no response to this remark, but his manner was so changed that his companion could not help to notice it. Finally he inquired the cause.

"Puff," said Holmes, as he took the bridle of his mustang, "you have the credit of being observant; let me ask you whether you noticed the fourth person seated in the canoe?"

"I noticed them all," was the reply.

"But there was something peculiar about the one to whom I allude."

"What was it?"

"It was a white person!"

"You are sure of that?"

"Yes; and besides that it is a female—a lady. Is it possible that you did not see her look up, with an imploring expression of countenance, as she glided under the bank?"

"Yes; it is possible I didn't see that, Holmes, because she didn't do it. You are right in saying that it was a white lady, and that she glanced upward at the moment of shooting; but there was nothing more nor less in her glance than would be in yours or mine under similar circumstances."

"You saw her, then?"

"I could not well avoid it."

"You have pretty good vision, but you are

not mistaken; she saw us—that look was a look of entreaty. She is captive in the hands of the Indians, and has applied to us for help."

"Well, what of it?"

"Do you suppose I shall unheed such a call for help? No; that glance was enough to lead me through fire and water for her sake. That captive shall be rescued and restored to her friends through my efforts, with the blessing of Heaven!"

Wolcott glowed with enthusiasm, while the obese Puff laughed his merriest laugh.

"You are a regular Don Quixote!"

"I am not," interrupted the young man, somewhat impatiently. "I engage in no wild, hair-brained scheme of imaginary good, but in a veritable work of humanity."

"She is good-looking," said Puff, smoothing his clean-shaven face, as though communing with himself. "There is witchery in the moon's rays, that may have brightened her attractions somewhat, but for all that she was unmistakably handsome. Holmes is young, and no doubt feels somewhat romantic, and I don't know whether he ought to be encouraged in this escapade or not. I wonder what his mother will think of it."

"She will consider me a son unworthy of her if I should refuse to assist one of her own sex."

Puff admired his young companion; he had seen his courage tried and proven more than once, but, at the same time, he was confident that that there was a touch of romance at the bottom of it all, and that the unquestionable beauty of the unknown captive had not a little to do with his enthusiasm.

"Come, come, don't get excited with me," replied Puff, his huge round body shaking like so much jelly. "If you are going to make an attempt to get the girl, then throw a little common sense into the business. Remember that you are a hero in actual life; it would be all right in a novel, for you to make a dive down the river, come up among a thousand redskins or less, snatch the beauty from the burning stake, rush off with her, and when you come to marry her, find she was a princess in disguise; but don't forget that if you undertake to do business in that way, you will get wound up in short meter."

"Well, what do you propose to do?" asked Wolcott, as he sprung into his saddle, and drew up the rein of his horse, who was nibbling the grass."

"Find a place to encamp and wait till daylight, before pursuing our investigations further. It's no use of trying to get back to camp before morning, and I ain't sure how we are going to make out even then."

His suggestion was acted upon without delay, and the next moment the two were riding away at a moderate gallop over the prairie.

They were more fortunate than they had reason to expect in this desolate country. Scarcely a quarter of a mile was passed, when they reached a small clump of trees, that were just the place for camping purposes.

The trees were stunted and of a scrubby growth, but the shelter was all-sufficient, and there was little or no inconvenience from the absence of water, as all had quenched their thirst at the "Lost River" before leaving it.

Riding beneath the inviting shade, the men dismounted from their weary mustangs, and placing their saddles and blankets upon the ground, prepared to sleep.

Common prudence would seem to suggest that the two should have taken turns in sleeping and not closed their eyes at the same time; but they were confident that there was nothing to be apprehended from Indians, and deemed it advisable to secure a good night's rest, while it was in their power to do so.

Still further, the sagacity of their mustangs was such that they would not fail to detect the approach of any foe; and for these reasons the two men stretched themselves out upon the ground for the purpose of sleeping.

Puff was the more fatigued of the two, and as he stretched out his aching limbs, with a sigh of content, he dropped off to sleep almost immediately—his slumber generally being of that deep and refreshing character, that is not disturbed by dreams or "nightmare."

But to Holmes Wolcott, sleep did not come so rapidly. His thoughts were filled with what he had seen during the last few hours, and especially with the sight of that wonderful face that had been upturned to him, as, visible for an instant, she had shot across his field of vision.

Who was she, and whither was she going? Was she a Mexican, a native of the tropics, or was she an American that had been stolen from

some emigrant-train, whose other members had been massacred?

How long had she been a captive? Did she still sigh for liberty? Had she friends, who were looking longingly for her coming?

A hundred questions like these thronged through the brain of our hero, as, lying flat on his back, he gazed up through the interstices of the trees, at the few stars that twinkled beyond, and wondered and speculated upon the being who had so suddenly invaded his thoughts to the exclusion almost of everything else.

But hark!

As he lies there close to the ground, he becomes conscious of some sound that faintly strikes upon his ear. He raises his head, but fails to hear it altogether; then he places his ear to the ground and it comes out with a distinctness absolutely startling.

Yes; far down beneath him, is flowing the Lost River, its murmuring coming faintly but distinctly to the ear. He and his companion have unconsciously made their camp directly over it.

Wolcott raises his heel and strikes it upon the ground. The sound is so hollow that he starts up in alarm and mutters:

"There is nothing but a shell between us and the subterranean river!"

He is about to arouse his companion, when it occurs to him, that if it is strong enough to bear the weight of their horses and the trees, there surely can be no danger of falling through. Besides the network of roots extending far under the ground, must give an unnatural strength to the earth. So closing his eyes, he drops his head back again, and committing his soul to Heaven, goes to sleep.

And his slumbers are not dreamless. All sorts of visions float through his brain, and more than once he starts up and gazes affrightedly about him.

She, the mysterious captive, seems to be sailing above his head, and to beckon him onward to a wonderful island in the sea, whither he found it impossible to come. Then, casting a look of unutterable sadness upon him, she seemed to vanish from view, only to appear further away and so indistinctly, that she seemed like a "spirit photograph" in the distance.

With her final evanishment comes a soft, shell-like murmur to his ear—so soft and faint that at first he deems it to be fairy-like music, but finally he is able to detect the noise of water, and becomes sensible that he is sleeping on the bank of the wonderful Lost River.

But at the same moment, he sees his friend—his comrade Puff, lying so close to the water, flowing dark and dreadful far below him, that he needs only a touch—a breath even, to topple over into the dark abyss.

Look! his mustang, cropping the grass, approaches. He almost steps upon his sleeping master. Wolcott endeavors to call out, but his voice fails him. He cannot speak nor move.

Merciful heaven! the horse takes another step nearer—the earth crumbles, and the animal shoots downward out of sight!

The sleeping man starts up! he seeks to move, but it is too late! He can only throw his arms above his head, and shriek in his despair, as he goes over the bank and down into the flood.

With a shriek of agony, Wolcott starts up, determined to sleep no more.

He looks affrightedly about him, but can see nothing in the darkness.

And then he learns that his dream is only a reflection of the reality: Puff and his horse have fallen through into the Lost River!

CHAPTER III.

ALONE IN THE SOLITUDE.

It was a fearful awakening, but when Holmes Wolcott opened his eyes, it was with a full consciousness of his situation, and with a knowledge of the appalling catastrophe that had taken place.

Beside him yawned a chasm, down which he heard the rush of water, and up which came the faint, despairing cry of his poor companion, as he had gone spinning down the dreadful abyss.

By stretching out his hand, he could feel the crumbling earth, and with a shudder of terror he crawled away, just in time to save himself from following his companion.

How it happened he could scarcely imagine—but a conviction that the incidents of his terrible dream were only a reflex of the incidents that had actually taken place came over him.

The mustang had approached close to the body of his master during the sleep of the latter, the treacherous ground had broken through and both had gone in an instant to their doom.

Shuddering from head to foot, and bathed in a perspiration of horror, Wolcott skurried out from the grove into the open prairie, where he thanked God for his narrow escape from a horrible death.

It was several minutes before he could recover himself. He walked around in the open air, until his burning brain was cooled, and he could collect his bewildered thoughts.

"Poor Puffy!" he murmured, "what a fearful taking off was his! One moment sleeping soundly, with no dream of danger and the next he and his horse spinning down the gaping chasm into the inky waters of the Lost River! God be with him!"

The next thought that presented itself to Wolcott was the query whether his horse had shared the fate of his companion. If he had also gone to his doom, then our hero was in a pitiable plight indeed.

The tragical occurrence that had taken place in the grove, gave him such an unspeakable horror of it, that he could not bring himself to enter its shade again during the darkness. He could, therefore, only wait until morning to see what had become of his property. He judged it more than likely that his mustang was gone, and he was almost helpless upon the desolate prairie.

The faint light of the moon was barely sufficient for him to distinguish the face of his watch. It was a little past three o'clock in the morning, and as it was the summer-time, daylight was not far away.

Further sleep was out of the question in the shattered condition of his nerves, and he kept up a pacing back and forth to pass away the dreary time that still hung heavily on his hands.

Desolate indeed did he feel, as with the quiet star-lit sky overhead, the murmur and ripple of the subterranean river, and the memory of the awful fate of his companion, he sighed and walked backward and forward, and looked longingly toward the east for the first appearance of the light that was to herald the coming of the morning.

The hours dragged slowly by, but at last there was an unmistakable glimmering in the east, and the light rapidly spread over the plain. When the rosy light had illuminated the whole horizon and day had broken—Wolcott started to re-enter the grove in order to make sure of the precise extent of his misfortune.

There lay his saddle, blanket and rifle, where he had placed them when stretching out to sleep the night before. A couple of feet from them yawned a hideous, jagged opening in the earth. It was eight or ten feet in diameter, and the crust of earth that had gone through had not been more than a couple of feet in thickness. The projecting roots dangled like the antennae of some horrible animals, and the pebbles and earth were still crumbling and falling.

Wolcott carefully drew back his property, and then drawn forward by some indescribable fascination, crept forward on his hands and knees and gazed down into the chasm.

Fully forty feet below flowed the Lost River. It looked dark and unnatural in the gloom of its subterranean bed, and was a fair image of the fabled Styx, around which clustered the gloom of the superstition of antiquity.

The walls of earth stretched far downward, irregular and dark, like the boundaries of the Mammoth Cave, and after the first glance the trembling hunter drew back with the sensations of the man who, creeping forward for the first time, gazes over the wonderful tower of Pisa.

Once again on the outer edge of the grove, under the clear sunlight of Heaven, where he could think for himself, Holmes Wolcott asked himself the wisest course to pursue under the circumstances.

Believing, as he did, that the river came to the surface again somewhere not far away, he felt that it was his duty to do all he could to recover the body of his lost friend and give it a burial. As he could not hope to do much alone, the course of prudence seemed to demand that he should find the main party from whom he had strayed and procure their assistance. They would be only too willing to assist in the humanitarian work for one who in life had rendered himself a general favorite with the army by his geniality and kindness.

He was in this gloomy frame of mind when he was pleasantly surprised by the sight of his mustang a few rods away, quietly cropping the herbage that grew very sparsely some distance beyond the outer edge of the grove.

So convinced had Holmes been all along of the loss of his horse, that he had made no search at

all for him, and, but for the accidental detection of the beast, would have gone away without any animal at all.

He made all haste to him, and the obedient creature seemed equally glad, whinnying with delight and advancing several yards to meet him.

The fate of Puff warned Wolcott of his danger, and he led his horse some distance to where the ground had a firmer sound before he ventured to mount him. Then, when certain that he was on genuine *terra firma*, he gave him free rein, and started off at full gallop in search of his companions, whom he had not seen for twenty-four hours.

About this time Holmes also became sensible of a gnawing hunger, that was anything but comfortable in its manifestations. He and Puff had taken a lunch together on the preceding noon, since which time he had been without a mouthful of food, but he was so anxious to come up with his friends that he made no halt or search for game.

The prairie in some places was so dry that the hoofs of his mustang threw up quite a cloud of dust, while in other spots there was luxuriant vegetation, affording capital fodder for animals.

Off to the left stretched a ridge of hills which he remembered crossing the previous day, and toward which he now turned the head of his animal and urged him at a rattling pace.

Now and then came thoughts of the mysterious captive whom he had seen seated in the Indian canoe, and who had vanished from view down the Lost River; but the sacred duty of friendship now demanded his attention, and he resolved that that should be performed before all others.

A half-hour's gallop brought him to the top of the ridge, where he instantly found himself in the vicinity of a camp-fire.

The ridge or chain of hills seemed to be the dividing line between the good and bad sections of the country. The latter he had just left, while he was now face to face with the former.

Before him stretched a hilly section, consisting in a great part of rolling prairies interspersed with groves of timber and patches of bright green grass. From a cluster of trees, through which ran a small stream of water, he saw the smoke of a fire ascending, and among the trees he could see the figures of men moving about. His first thought, naturally enough, was that they were Indians, and he was about to ride back again and pass their camp by a long *detour*, when the thought that possibly they might be friends restrained him.

Looking more carefully at the camp, he was pleased to discover that they were white men in the garb of hunters. Relieved on this score, he spurred his mustang forward, and a few seconds later drew rein at the camp, where he saw a half-dozen shaggy, sunburnt men, who, while staring curiously at him, did not fail to make him welcome.

They were just preparing their morning meal, and the savory smell of cooking meat, made Wolcott feel his hunger more keenly than ever. He was glad to join them in eating the buffalo-meat, and made one of the most substantial and enjoyable meals of his life.

He explained that he had been lost the previous day from his friends, and was now searching for them. They were a party of miners making their way through the country, and disgusted with their success, were on their way to Los Angeles, for the purpose of embarking for San Francisco, there to engage, as they expressed it, in some decent business. They invited him to accompany them, but he declined for reasons which he did not deem it best to make known, and inquired whether they had seen any signs of another white party in the neighborhood, in the course of the last twenty-four hours.

"Yas; we see'd 'em," was the reply of one of the men, who up to this time had not spoken a word.

"Where and when?" asked Wolcott.

"About two miles off yester'day, just about sun-down. I war out scoutin' alone, when I see'd 'em breakin' camp."

"Breakin' camp!" repeated Wolcott, in amazement; "you mean going into camp?"

"I mean just what I said," was the sullen response. "They war breakin' camp, and war in a powerful hurry about it too."

"Frightened by Indians, I suppose."

"No, they warn't neither. It wa'n't no such thing; they wanted to go home."

"What could possibly be the matter?" continued our hero, in increasing amazement.

"Thar war some chap that they called a messenger that had just come in on horseback,

and he told 'em somethin' that made 'em all tear thar shirts they war in such a hurry to make tracks for hum. I rather reckon you've got ter travel, ef you expect to catch 'em this side of Los Angeles."

This information very naturally excited the curiosity of young Wolcott, who saw in it something that intimately concerned himself. Bidding his transient friends good-by, he took the direction indicated, putting his horse to a lively gallop so that no time should be lost.

As he advanced, the country began to wear a somewhat familiar look, showing that he and Puff must have gone over it in their travels on the preceding day.

By and by, he caught sight of the camping site, as it had been described to him by the miner, and he headed straight toward it, so as to take the trail, and follow his friends until he could overtake them.

Reaching the spot, he saw that his informant had spoken the truth: there were evidences of a hasty breaking of camp, although what the meaning of it all was, was more than he could conjecture.

He sat on his mustang, looking about him, when he saw a bit of paper fastened to a stake stuck in the ground. From where he sat he could read the name of himself and Puff, proving that it was addressed to them.

The next minute it was in his hand and he read:

"A messenger has just reached us from Los Angeles, sent from Frisco, and commanding our immediate return. An opposition party, much larger than ours, was sent across the mountains several weeks before we started, with the intention of heading us off: and, as there are a number of the most desperate characters in it, your father is confident they intend to massacre us all. Furthermore, the wife of Colonel Wright (the leader of the expedition) lies at the point of death, and the house of Fritz, our right-hand man, has been burned to the ground. Under these circumstances, we have determined to leave this desolate country without an hour's unnecessary delay. Should you fail to come into Los Angeles, within a few hours of our arrival, I am sure Colonel Wright will sail without you, as no words can describe his anxiety to reach his wife. If this paper reaches your hands by daybreak tomorrow (the 10th) there is a chance of your sailing with us, provided you put your horses to the top of their speed; but, if you are later, you may as well take it leisurely, for you will have to procure your own conveyance from the 'Habitation of the Angels.'

"Had we nothing but the other party to hurry us out of the country, we would wait your return; but it is the colonel's great anxiety that puts us in such headlong haste; and, as we have really accomplished every thing that we came for, and, as you will have no difficulty or danger, in following us, we really have no right to object to the colonel's summary method of doing things."

EDWARD G. MCNEY."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MOHAVE VILLAGE.

HOLMES WOLCOTT held in his hand the little slip of paper upon which the foregoing words had been printed, and asked himself what was the best course to pursue under the circumstances.

He read again that portion wherein he was warned that if he failed to reach camp by daybreak, it would be useless for him to hope to overtake the party, and then he looked at the face of his watch.

"The forenoon is one-half gone, so that matter is settled. If I choose to go to Los Angeles, I can have the escort of the party I have just left, but I don't feel as though I ought to go."

No; he could not bring himself to the point of leaving this section—cheerless as it was—with the conclusion never to return again. He felt that he must do what he could to rescue the body of his friend from decaying upon the shore of the river, a prey to the birds of the air, and a putrefying carcass in the nostrils of all that passed that way.

Then the figure of the unknown seemed to rise more vividly than ever, at the very thought of going away. A weird beauty—a subtle fascination drew him toward her, and a feeling not altogether different from relief took possession of him at the thought that his friends had already gone so far away, that it was vain for him to hope to catch them before they would reach their destination in the distant metropolis of the State.

Recollecting the claims of friendship, he determined, as the first step, to make a faithful search for the remains of his friend. He had intended to question the miners regarding the Lost River, but in the excitement of the moment, it had escaped his memory altogether.

But he knew the course of the channel, and

he could follow that, watching for the place where it made its way to the surface again. The body found, the effects preserved, to be taken to his heart-broken mother, who little dreamed of what had befallen her only child, and the remains, by some means or other, placed beneath the sod, and then Wolcott felt he would be at liberty to attempt to solve the mystery of the captive, whose wonderful beauty had completely enthralled him.

This determination reached, the young hunter lost no time in acting upon it. Five minutes after reading the note, it was thrust into his pocket, and his tough little mustang was careering over the billowy prairie, as if he comprehended the wishes of his master, and was all afire to carry them out.

Wolcott took good care to avoid the miners with whom he had breakfasted. He had no wish to make any troublesome explanation, and as he had concluded to remain in the Mohave country for an indefinite time, there was nothing to be gained from them.

Over the ridge again, and off over the desolate country, far to the westward of the grove, where he had spent such a fearful night, his mustang bounded until—hark—the ground beneath his ringing hoofs gave back the peculiar hollow sound, which showed that the Lost River was flowing beneath.

It was rather too dangerous a proceeding for Wolcott to gallop over the crust of earth with the liability of breaking through at any moment. By a careful scrutiny of the appearance of the prairie, he found he was able to trace the underground course of the river, and he therefore drew off upon solid ground, and continued his course in that direction.

"Helloa, there! what's your hurry?"

Holmes started and looked to the left, where, less than a hundred yards away, were the very miners whom he had seen early that morning, and whom he was anxious to avoid.

There was no eluding them, so he reined up and put the best face possible on the matter.

"What are you doing here?" was the natural query of the leader.

"I made my way to camp as directed by you, and found that my friends had so much the start of me, that there was no use of attempting to overhaul them."

"Then you will go to Los Angeles with us, of course."

"I can hardly promise that, although I should be glad of your company. The fact is, I am looking for a friend, from whom I got separated last evening. My hurry to get into camp was to see whether I could not get the rest to wait; failing in that, I must go it alone."

Wolcott did not deem it necessary to explain the particulars of Puff's disappearance, but he had said enough to satisfy their curiosity, and explain his own course of action.

"Ah, that's it," replied the miner. "I wish we could stay and help you, but I am sure you will find him without difficulty, and without assistance on our part."

"I hope so, and, by the way, have you a member of your party who is thoroughly acquainted with this part of California?"

"There's Baltus, who went through it with Commodore Stockton's marines, when he conquered the Territory, in 1846. He can tell you any thing you want to know."

The same fellow who had directed Wolcott to the deserted camp of his friends, was pointed out, and looked willing to answer any question.

"Do you know any thing about the river, which a few miles from here goes underground?"

"I rather reckon so."

"Can you tell how far it is from here that it comes to the surface again?"

The miner looked as if he did not understand his meaning.

"The river must have an outlet somewhere," added Wolcott, by way of explanation. "How far away from here is it?"

"You are mistook—powerful mistook," was the reply; "the river hasn't any outlet at all. It goes down deeper and deeper until it is swallowed up in the bowels of the earth."

"You are sure of that?"

"Me and a couple of trappers, ten years ago, followed it for two days, till there want any more signs of it, and then to make sure, axed a lot of friendly Mohaves: they told us what we thought; that their mother took it to its bosom ag'in."

"That is very strange," said the young man, taken all aback at the words of the hunter.

"What's so qu'ar 'bout it?" asked the latter, somewhat impatiently. "It ain't the only river that does the same thing."

"The reason for my wonderment is this: last night, while my friend and myself were standing at the point where the river goes under the earth, we saw a boat of Indians float down the stream, and they seemed to take it so coolly, that we supposed that as a matter of course, they had some way of getting out again."

"So they had."

"How?"

"For a dozen miles from here, you will find big holes broke the yearth into the river, and it ain't a hard thing for the red-skins to climb up out of some of these."

"How came these holes there?"

"Most of 'em have been bu'sted by bufflers or wild animals, and some of 'em have caved in themselves."

"Have you ever been down?"

"No; I never cared nothin' 'bout it, but I wouldn't be afeared to go. Fact of it is, I once see'd a party of Injins comin' out of the air-holes."

This let in a flood of light upon Wolcott's mind, and he understood that which well-nigh seemed unexplainable to him before. There was some means of descending to and ascending from the Lost River, independent of its natural entrance.

He now endeavored to engage Baltus to accompany him in his search, offering him a very liberal compensation for doing so, but the miner was so thoroughly disgusted with the country that he resolutely refused all offers.

"I only want to get out of this infernal place where it is as hot as Tophet, and there ain't enough of the yaller metal to galvanize a muskeeter's bill. None of the Mohave country for me, if you please."

It was useless to persuade, and so Wolcott gave over the attempt.

Again bidding his new acquaintances good-bye, he turned his mustang about and galloped toward the river, aiming to reach the point where he had seen the boat with the Apaches and the beautiful captive disappear from view.

"I shall never leave this country till I have fathomed the mystery regarding her," he muttered, as he reined his horse, down to a walk, that he might collect his thoughts and think deliberately. "She is a white person, and in need of some friend, such as I shall prove myself to be."

Then his mind reverted to his lost friend.

"Poor Puff! I never knew how much I loved him until he is gone. Perhaps I may yet be able to find his body."

The unobserved manner in which the miners had approached Wolcott warned him of the danger to which he was subject from Indians, and he resolved to be more careful of himself.

Sweeping the horizon with his eye, he saw behind him the ridge of hills over which he had galloped, and off to the north-west the party of miners were fast vanishing from view. Ahead of him stretched a broad, level country, many parts of it dusty and sterile, while the patches and fringes of vegetation in other places showed that the soil was irrigated by underground streams.

By this time it was near noon, and in a country like the present it was necessary that he should pay some heed to his commissariat. Food could be procured, but it was no easy matter to do so.

A half hour's sharp ride brought him to the surface river, and with curious emotions he looked up-stream.

The surface was broad and the river unbroken for something like a mile, when he noticed that the country became broken, and the course of the stream so changed as to become invisible.

"The Indians came from somewhere up there," he mused, "and there must be something for me to see among those hills. At any rate, this is a poor place to make a reconnaissance."

It was prudent that he should choose some other post of observation, as he could not avoid being seen by any red-skins in descending the river.

Keeping to the right bank of the river, therefore, he continued up its course until the character of the country began to change. Realizing that he was leaving the prairie, he turned back to take a prudential survey of it.

Off to the northward he saw a party of horsemen that, at a second glance, he saw were approaching him.

"It cannot be miners," he muttered, as he anxiously scrutinized them, "for they are too anxious to reach Los Angeles. It must be a party of Apaches or Mohaves, and it is fortun-

ate that I left the open prairie, where they would have been certain to see me."

Strange that it did not occur to him that they already had seen him!

Believing that he was also nearing the vicinity of red-skins, Wolcott advanced with extreme caution, his horse walking very slowly, while he kept a constant look-out against running into some danger.

He was somewhat surprised to find that his horse was treading in the footprints of other horses. Whether made by wild or tame ones, he could only conjecture, but he suspected the latter, and believed he was approaching an Indian village.

The indications of such being the case so increased that he deemed it unsafe to ride his animal any further; he therefore dismounted, and leading him some distance among the stunted trees, he fastened him to one, and returned to pursue his reconnaissance on foot.

The country through which he was passing at this particular juncture was very rugged in its character, consisting of ridges and hills, covered with stubby undergrowth, and of such a character that his view at all times was very limited and uncertain.

The bed of the river undergoing such a change caused the water to make quite an uproar, as it made its way toward its destination.

For nearly an hour Wolcott labored along, and then he was rewarded by making an important discovery. The river was less than two hundred yards wide, and on the opposite side was an Indian village numbering fifty lodges.

It undoubtedly belonged to the Mohaves—that nomadic tribe which abound in Southeastern California, Nevada and Arizona, and whose habitation is as uncertain as the Arabs of the desert.

"Perhaps I shall learn something of her," reflected Wolcott, as he prepared to make as critical a survey as possible of the village.

CHAPTER V.

UNWELCOME COMPANIONS.

WOLCOTT found plenty to engage his attention in watching the Mohave village.

He secured a safe place, where he felt safe from observation, and viewed everything with a keenness of interest that is difficult to imagine. The indolence and squalor peculiar to most Indian villages seemed almost entirely wanting here. A number of children, neatly although rather scantily arrayed, could be seen playing at some sort of game, while the women, as might be expected, were all at work at something. Several were fishing, some distance down the bank, and a number were evidently engaged in tilling the earth, near at hand, as they could be seen coming and going, with the most primitive implements of agriculture in their hands.

The tribe was apparently quite wealthy, and had no doubt acquired the major part of their property by stealing and raiding upon emigrants and herders, who frequently came through from Santa Fe, with large droves of sheep, bound for middle California, which at that day was settling so rapidly that they were in great demand, and brought such large prices as tempted them to incur the risk of a passage through the Mohave country.

Few men were to be seen. Here and there some gaudily-dressed warrior sauntered through the village, with the air of one who was fully conscious that he belonged to the *genus*—lords of creation.

"But where is she?" Wolcott asked himself; "has she not returned from her voyage down the Lost River?"

His question received an answer sooner than he had dared to hope. At the upper end of the village—that is, at the point furthest removed from him—he saw three persons approach a small canoe, and enter it. Two of these were Indian women, and the third was the unknown captive.

Viewed from the concealment of Wolcott, she seemed more marvelously beautiful than ever. Her dress was entirely Indian in its character, with leggins, moccasins, and even the stained feathers in her dark hair; but there was no paint upon her person, and her arms, from the elbow downward, and her face, showed unmistakably the clear blood of the Caucasian.

Before stepping in the boat, the girl stood for a moment, looking up and down the stream, so that her beautiful figure was brought out in all its wonderful symmetry. Her face, too, as she moved it, seemed to be faultless in its contour, and her dark eyes had the very glow and sparkle of perfect health.

Wolcott's heart throbbed almost painfully as

he gazed upon her. It would have been hard for any stranger to look upon such an exhibition of female loveliness without emotion, yet the young explorer's agitation was that of him who looks upon his heart's delight—upon her who for the first time has stirred the great passion of our nature to its profoundest depths.

A red-skin at that moment might have stolen up and almost scalped him, so absorbed, so riveted was his attention. He scarcely heeded her companions; he saw her step into the canoe, take up the long Indian paddle; and then, when the trio began moving down-stream, he breathed freely, and seemed to throw off the spell which had held him for a time.

"She is going down the river—she will soon vanish down the Lost River!" was the reflection of Wolcott, as he prepared, under no little excitement, to follow her.

Down the path he ran, his escape from the observation of those in the village depending more on good fortune than anything else. As soon as he reached his horse he vaulted in the saddle, and started for the open prairie.

By the time he was on the back of his mustang his senses partly came back to him, and he used more prudence in his movements. This, from the rugged character of the ground, delayed his progress so much, that when he gained a view of the river again, the canoe was quite a distance below him.

But as soon as permitted, he made up for all this lost time; and, passing over the ridge, he struck into a rapid gallop, that quickly brought him abreast of the boat.

The occupants, as a matter of course, saw him and, as may be supposed, were almost thunderstruck at his appearance and actions.

The captive paused in her paddling, and stared, as if unable to comprehend what it meant: the squaws manifested alarm, and one of them seized the paddle and sent the canoe toward the other bank, as if they meditated flight.

Wolcott saw it, and raising his hand, shouted:

"Don't you do it! I have come to save you from your captors and take you home! Don't allow them to take you away!"

Still the canoe approached the other shore, and growing desperate at the prospect of losing her for whom he was willing to risk his life, he raised his rifle, and pointing it at them called out:

"Stop! or I will shoot!"

Probably the two squaws did not understand the words he uttered, but there was no mistaking the meaning of his actions, and the paddling ceased on the instant.

Had the Mohaves been armed, it is not at all likely that they would have submitted to this dictation; but, with the courage characteristic of their race, would have answered the summons with their bullets.

Riding his horse into the very margin of the river, Wolcott addressed himself directly to the fair captive.

"I have come to rescue you," said he; "you are of another race and people, and I know must be an unwilling resident among these Indians. Am I right?"

The young man paused for a few seconds, but there was no reply. By this time, the canoe had drifted some distance down-stream, and was rapidly approaching the point where the stream was lost to view beneath the earth.

"I am a stranger to you," added Wolcott, as he permitted his horse to resume his walk. "I have a swift mustang, plenty of ammunition, and will soon carry you to Los Angeles, and will never rest until you are restored to your friends."

The maiden had again taken the paddle. She did not speak, but sadly shook her head.

Encouraged by this attention, Wolcott became, if possible, more earnest than ever.

"You may never have this opportunity again; why throw it away? No one can harm you; come with me, and bid good-by to these Mohaves."

Although the maiden spoke not, yet her two companions kept up an incessant chattering. They seemed to comprehend the purpose of the horseman, and were endeavoring to impress her with her danger in listening to the tempter.

She appeared to be persuaded by what they said, and continued idly dallying with the paddle, assisting not a little the boat in its swift progress down-stream.

"Are you afraid?" demanded Wolcott, beginning to feel desperate, as the moments grew more precious. "Do you think you can not succeed in escaping, or are you distrustful of me?"

This question brought a reply from the mys-

terious captive. Shaking her head in the same sad way, she replied, in a voice of inexpressible sweetness:

"I beseech you flee, and attend to your own safety. I thank you, but you can do me no good, and are greatly imperiling your life by remaining here."

As may be supposed, Holmes Wolcott became more resolute and impassioned than ever. He begged, entreated and implored, and threatened to swim his horse out and bring her to land; but she made no reply, and continued paddling and rapidly nearing the point where it was certain she would vanish from his view.

Why she acted in this manner it would be hard to say. She seemed to appreciate the interest shown in her by one of her own race, but evidently regarded an effort to escape as worse than useless.

Indeed, when the matter was looked at with coolness, it can but be admitted that she was reasonable in so thinking. Supposing she had availed herself of his offer—had come ashore in her canoe, and mounted his mustang beside or in front of him.

The squaws would give the alarm, and in half an hour a horde of Indians, mounted on fresh and fleet horses, would be in pursuit; and, burdened as his poor horses would be, with so many hours of daylight before him, what prospect had he of escaping the avenging Mohaves?

But Holmes Wolcott thought not of this, as he besought her in such imploring tones to flee from captivity with him.

The scene was painful, and fortunately could not last long. Without uttering another word, but with a sad, lingering, almost loving, look upon the part of the maiden, the canoe entered the dark cavernous opening in the earth, and disappeared from sight, and the disappointed lover was left alone.

He reined up his horse on the edge of the river, and sat for a few moments in deep thought.

"Why did she refuse to go with me?" he asked himself. "If I read that look aright, she did not suspect that my motive was any thing but her own good. What can it be then?"

This was the question upon which he pondered long.

"It must be that she thought the opportunity not a good one. Perhaps it was not, but if that is the reason she shall not wait long before that excuse shall be taken away and none left her."

The afternoon was now well advanced, and Wolcott endeavored to think calmly upon the situation and to arrange his plans of action with some foresight and prudence. He was determined to remain in the vicinity until he could secure an interview with the maiden, whom he felt he loved more madly than ever; and, in order to do so, he felt that he must arrange some "basis of operations," and fix upon some place where he could leave his horse when necessary, and where he might enjoy a degree of comparative safety.

The hills and uplands which he had just left naturally suggested themselves; but their proximity to the village was an objection; he looked about him to see whether any other spot could be made available.

As he did so he espied two horsemen in the garb of hunters, a few hundred yards away, and riding toward him. Somewhat surprised, but not altogether displeased, he reined up and awaited their approach.

He was not pleased with their countenances as they came nearer. The gleam of their eyes, and the peculiar cut of their physiognomy, indicated desperate men, and a chill of misgiving came over our hero, as he returned their rough salutation.

"How ar' you, stranger?" called out the worst-looking man of the two; "how wags the world with you?"

Wolcott replied that he was well, and inquired as to the state of their health.

"Tollyble," was the reply; "we've had an infarnal tramp, and feel blamed dusty and tired. Stranger in these parts?"

"I am very little acquainted, never having seen this country a week ago. Are you hunting?"

"Yas," replied the same man, with a grin to his companion.

"Not a very good game country."

"No; poor—howsumever, just now we're hunting for a party of men that are prospectin' somewhere through this country!"

"Are they under the command of Colonel Wright?"

"That's the identycal company."

"I belong to the party."

"Ah!" was the reply, and the two villains looked at each other, with a peculiar significance, doing it, however, so slyly that it escaped the notice of the young man altogether.

"May I inquire whether you had any special errand with them?"

"Wal, yas: rather. We left Los Angeles about a fortnight ago, hearing that Colonel Wright and his men war byerabouts, and that thar war a party of reds and whites that war crossing down through the country with the jeeve of raisin' the ha'r of the whole company. We war bound to Sante Fe, arter a druv of sheep, but we've been lookin' round for Colonel Wright to tell him of his danger—but hain't seen nothin' of him. How fur is he from byer?"

"A good many miles, and well on his way to Los Angeles."

"How is that?" asked the hunter, in genuine amazement.

"A messenger was sent to Colonel Wright, apprising him of the dangerous sickness of his mother, and he left in great haste."

"Did he hear anything about this other party that was arter him?"

"Yes; he heard that, but it didn't give him much alarm. I think he would have remained, but for the domestic affliction that called him home so suddenly."

"How is it you're left behind?"

"I was away from camp, at the time the messenger arrived and did not get back until so late after they had gone, that I saw it was no use in attempting to follow with the hope of overtaking them."

"So you're prospectin' a little on your own hook?" asked the other, with a repulsive grin.

"Something of that character, although the result of our expedition leads me to hope for nothing auriferous in this part of the world."

Wolcott noticed that one man did all the talking upon his side, the other as yet not having opened his mouth, although his looks showed that he was deeply interested in what was said.

"Thar's a party of us carped over in the grove yonder; we're goin' to stay thar to-night, and I'll be glad to have you jine us."

Wolcott accepted the invitation, doing so, for the reason that he saw the prospect of securing a much-needed meal with little trouble on his part.

So the three moved away together in the direction of the camp.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

REACHING the grove of trees, with his two companions, Wolcott found that they had encamped on the very spot where poor Puff had met his frightful doom.

There was abundance of room, without coming in dangerous proximity to the yawning cavern, that looked down into the black depths of the Lost River, and no thoughts of danger seemed to enter their minds, as they gathered, smoking and eating, around their camp-fire.

They were a dangerous-looking set of men as they curiously surveyed the arrival of a stranger among them. One or two returned his polite salutation, but the majority looked surlily at him, as though they considered his room better than his company.

The young man was half inclined to withdraw, had he not been fearful of exciting the ire of the men. He saw some there who he knew would be glad of an opportunity to make a quarrel with him, and who would have no hesitation in shooting him in the back while riding away. Having stated his case to the two whom he had first encountered, there was no prospect of making any pretext for his departure that would be believed, so he concluded to remain and make the best of a thoroughly bad situation.

He heard one of the men, who seemed to be the leader, and who certainly was the most villainous-looking man in the party, addressed as "Baldy," probably from the fact that he had been scalped a number of years before, and, as a consequence, had no hair upon the upper part of his head.

This man, after talking a few minutes with the two men who had brought in our hero, approached him, and with a sort of grin extended his hand.

"How ar' yer? So you're alone in these yer diggings?"

"I was until I met a couple of your men, and concluded to accept the invitation to spend the night with you."

"They tell mo Colonel Wright has left."

"Yes; he can't be very far from Los Angeles by this time."

"You don't s'pose he'll be back in these parts ag'in?"

"Certainly not, as he has no reason for returning. He is prepared to make his full report to his employers of the objects that brought him hither."

"He was sent to look for gold and silver."

"More properly, he came to see whether it was worth while for others to come."

"Wal, what's the prospect?"

"The poorest imaginable; this part of California is as poor in the precious metals as the other part is rich."

"Whar's the man what staid behind with yer?"

"I do not know; I have been searching for him," said Wolcott, beginning to feel uneasy at this close questioning.

"Do yer think he'll be in camp this evening?"

"I hardly think he will, as I was unable to find any trace of him all day."

Muttering an imprecation that he took no pains to keep from being overheard, Baldy turned on his heel and walked away. His manner showed that he was disappointed at something.

At this moment a startling suspicion crossed the mind of Holmes Wolcott.

This was the very party that had been sent out to massacre Colonel Wright and his party.

The more he reflected upon it, the more satisfied did he become that his suspicions were correct. Everything pointed in that direction, and at the end of five minutes not a particle of doubt remained.

No doubt could now remain of the extreme peril of his situation, and he most heartily wished himself a dozen miles away over the prairie, even though deprived of his weapons.

But a movement in that direction would only precipitate the very thing he was so anxious to avoid. He saw that he was under surveillance, every moment being watched, as though the men were suspicious of some move in that direction upon his part.

Aside from the threatening danger, it would be hard to imagine a more painfully embarrassing situation than was that of the young man. Men were smoking and chatting and lounging in all sorts of positions about him, and yet he had not been invited to sit down or unite with them. Even the leader, after asking a few impudent questions, had rudely turned upon his heel and left him.

Under the circumstances, it was the wisest course to affect not to see these slights, and Holmes, therefore, took an easy position near one of the men, making some remark as he did so.

As might be expected, there was no reply to this. He was not addicted to the habit of smoking, yet he wished that some one would invite him to do so, in order to give him an opportunity for declining.

The invitation was not given, however, so that small consolation was deprived him. Two of the men were occupied in cooking some buffalo-meat, which was soon ready to be eaten.

There was abundance for all, and the men began serving it out, but they took good pains to ignore the presence of a stranger altogether, and in a few moments the jaws of every man were going, except those of Wolcott.

The latter, despite his personal danger, was so exasperated at this insulting treatment, that he turned to the man, and said:

"You have forgotten to furnish me with some food, sir."

"I didn't cook none for you, and you'll have to get your own fodder."

"Very well, I can do that," replied Wolcott, rising to his feet and starting toward his horse.

"Hold on thar! what's the matter?" called out Baldy, advancing toward him.

"I have had no supper, and I am anxious to procure some."

"Hold on a bit, and if we have any left, p'raps we'll give you a bite."

"I have no wish to trespass upon your hospitality, sir," replied Wolcott, with dignity. "I prefer to withdraw from a place where I am evidently so unwelcome."

"You'll stay yar till mornin'," was the brutish answer.

"But I do not choose to remain."

"That don't make no difference," continued Baldy, and he added, in a voice so threatening that the attention of the others was drawn instantly to the spot, "I tell yer you stay yar tonight!"

Wolcott's passion was getting the better of his judgment.

"You have no power to compel me to stay."

"I hain't, eh? I'll soon show yer." Baldy strode fiercely toward the young man, with a drawn knife. Wolcott stepped back a pace or two and drew his revolver. The others gathered around, counting upon some amusement in the shape of a first-class encounter.

But the scoundrel had not counted upon any such resistance as this. Standing motionless a moment, he glared at his antagonist, whose flashing eyes were fixed upon him, and muttered with a frightful oath:

"I've a mind to cut your heart out!"

In the minute or so that had passed since the assumption of this attitude by the men, Wolcott's "sober second thought" had come to him. He had no personal fear of the bully, but surrounded by such desperate characters, he knew that there could be but one issue to such a conflict.

He saw that Baldy was really afraid of him. Instead, therefore, of goading him on to attack, Holmes determined to give him an opportunity to withdraw without any self-humiliation in the presence of his men. He therefore affected a timid weakness which he was far from feeling.

"I wish no quarrel with you. I came here on invitation, but believing myself unwelcome, I conclude to leave."

"He wants sumthin' to eat. Give him a hunk of meat, boys," growled Baldy, turning about and walking away, very glad to get out of such a dangerous situation.

One of the men tossed a piece of meat in the face of Wolcott, who declined to stoop and pick it up, but coolly took his place on the ground again.

Almost any set of men would have been filled with respect at the dignified conduct of Wolcott; but there were no such characters among those who were gathered around this camp-fire. They scowled at the young man, indignant that he should have "backed down" and spoiled their game at the very moment of greatest hope, and more than one of them felt as though he would willingly take it in hand himself.

As for Baldy, the leader, Wolcott well knew he had earned his inveterate hate, and he would take the first opportunity to wreak a cowardly revenge upon him; so that, after all, it cannot be said that he had improved his prospects to a very great extent. It would be more proper, perhaps, to say that he had only deferred the crisis, which, in all human probability, must come before the rising sun.

Under the mask of assumed indifference, Wolcott kept a watch upon the movements of the men around him. He saw them conversing together and glancing toward him, showing that he was the subject of their conversation. He could hear the murmur of words, and by and by he caught a phrase or two, such as, "When he's asleep," "Fix him," "Wait awhile," etc.

Baldy engaged in this conversation, and seemed to take the deepest interest, while he who had occasion to be most concerned acted as though he heard and suspected nothing of danger.

The night was quite sharp, and Holmes wrapped his blanket about him, sitting down some distance away from the fire. His blanket was of rather a gay color, being dark crimson, while those about him were of such a dingy hue, and in so dilapidated a condition, that he wondered that a forcible exchange had not already taken place.

"Doubtless they expect to get all my property," he concluded, "and so they are in no hurry to take it piecemeal."

He was in momentary expectation of an order to deliver up his weapons, but he determined to resist such a command to the bitter end. Under Heaven, his reliance was upon his rifle and revolver. The latter afforded him five good shots, which he was determined to expend upon his enemies, should they assail him.

As they kept away from him so persistently, he began to suspect that they intended to wait until he should fall asleep, when the poltroons could attack him without incurring any danger at all.

This suspicion was strengthened by the action of Baldy, who, with his repulsive face disfigured by a hideous grin, advanced toward him with outstretched hand.

"We'll call it square on that little matter atwixt us. You showed good pluck, I'll be skulped ef yer didn't."

"I am glad to take your hand," said Wolcott, as he warmly shook the proffered digits.

"They used you sorter mean, but the fact is they war forgetful."

"That was it, was it?"

The Lost Hunters.

"Precisely; and they axed me to say as much to yer fur 'em—"

"Say no more about it," interrupted Holmes, "your explanation is sufficient."

"Yer ready to call it squar', be yer?"

"Nothing would please me more."

"Give us yer hand on it, then," added Baldy, shaking his hand with great apparent cordiality. "I'll tell the boys and they'll be glad to hear it."

The leader went back to where his comrades were gathered and talked a few minutes in a low voice. They exclaimed, as if they had been previously instructed:

"A good feller," "Bully for him," "He's my style of a man."

All of which was good enough in its way, but it never deceived Holmes Wolcott, for a moment. It was as transparent as was the pretended friendship of the leader of the whole precious pack.

The night wore slowly on, and by and by some of the men began to stretch out in an attitude of sleep.

"See yar," said Baldy, approaching the young man, "you and me will take a snooze near together. What do you say?"

"As you please," was the reply, which concealed the intense aversion of Wolcott to any close companionship with him.

"Thar's a nice place off yer, whar we kin lay down by ourselves, away from the others."

Baldy led the way to the outer edge of the grove, where they were beyond the circle of light thrown out by the fire, and there he stretched out upon the ground.

"That ar' is a purty blanket of yourn," remarked Baldy, as the young man prepared to do the same.

"Allow me to present you with it," said Wolcott, tossing it to him.

"Don't want yer to do that; we'll trade, so it will be even on both sides."

Holmes thought it was very far from being even, as he accepted the ragged garment in return, but he took it with as good grace as possible, and the two lay down within a half a dozen feet of each other.

The clean, warm embrace of the Indian blanket of Wolcott around the villainous form of Baldy, seemed to afford him great pleasure, and scarcely ten minutes had elapsed, when he was sound asleep.

As for Holmes Wolcott, there was little danger of his losing unconsciousness. He felt that his life hung in the balance, and never did he need his senses more than at the present time.

CHAPTER VII.

A THRILLING EXPERIENCE.

FULLY two hours passed, without Holmes Wolcott detecting anything of a suspicious character. His eyes and ears were on the alert, so that nothing important escaped him.

He had wrapped himself from head to foot in his blanket, as Baldy had done in his. Lying with his face turned toward the fire, and with his own figure in the darkness, he was sure of detecting any one who came near the fire.

The latter was kept burning at a steady rate, and now and then he could catch glimpses of several figures moving about beyond the campfire, and beyond the prone figures near.

But everything was silent, and he heard no words uttered—nothing but the faint flow of the Lost River, away down in the earth—many feet below them all.

It was near midnight when Wolcott, as he peered through his folded blanket, saw a couple of men approach and throw some wood upon the fire. As it flamed up, throwing a flood of light over himself and companion, the other men rose to their feet and gathered about the fire. They were talking in such low tones, that not a word could be overheard, although it was plain that they were referring to the stranger who was among them.

They seemed to be settling upon some course of action, which required several minutes to decide. At length all was finished, and they moved toward the two recumbent figures.

One of the men was a step or two in advance of the others, and approaching the spot where Wolcott was lying, touched him gently with his foot, saying in a husky, eager undertone:

"Come, Cap, git up, fur it's 'bout time the fun begun."

Looking at the blanket folded about the form of the young stranger, they naturally supposed him to be Baldy their leader.

Comprehending the mistake, Wolcott dissimulated with no little tact. Turning upon his other side, so as to keep his face away from the fire, he yawned, gaped and struggled to his feet in a bewildered sort of way.

"What time is it?" he asked, in a sort of half-whisper.

"It's after twelve o'clock, and the way he's snorin', he's sleepin' like a log."

As yet, Holmes was altogether in the dark as to the course they intended to take regarding their victim. He wished if possible to learn it, so as to decide upon his own line of conduct.

"It seems too bad to throw such a good blanket down the hole with him," remarked one, whose words supplied the very information needed.

They intended to throw him down the opening into the Lost River.

It was a diabolical plan, but it was characteristic of these desperate and abandoned wretches.

"He's a regular bull-dog," remarked the counterfeit Baldy, in the same guarded voice; "better not give him a chance to pull his pistol on us."

"But can't we carry him without wakin' him up?" asked one of the men, as the party stood whispering about their victim.

"We can fix that," said Wolcott, who saw a way of escape from a dangerous *expose*. "Keep the blanket about him, till we pitch him down, then we'll hold fast to it."

This proposition met with general favor, and several of the strongest men stooped around the snoring body.

"Be careful and keep it closed about him, for he'll yell and kick like thunder."

The caution was heeded. Carefully gathering the blanket, so as to keep it folded, they raised the man from the ground, and began bearing him toward the yawning rent in the earth, which was plainly lit up by the replenished fire.

Disturbed thus in his slumber, it was a second or two before Baldy suspected what was being done with him, but he speedily aroused, and began struggling and cursing the stupidity of his own men.

The latter only held him the tighter, and hurried toward the great, gaping cavern.

"Be careful he doesn't escape you," called out Wolcott, who, with blanket wrapped closely about him, was following close in the rear of the struggling leader.

It required considerable strength to hold the fellow, as he struggled like a caged lion; but there were a dozen equally strong against one man, whom they held at disadvantage.

Crack! bang! went two barrels of a revolver from within, but no one was hurt, and it was more than likely that the densely woven blanket prevented the bullets coming through.

The shots and the smothered curses, however, alarmed the men who were carrying their victim, and several of them showed a disposition to drop him, lest his next shot should prove more effective against them.

"Don't give him a chance," called out Wolcott, in a voice of dangerous loudness, "he'll shoot every one of you, if you let go of him."

"It looks as though he war goin' to do it anyway," growled one of the others, cowering and shrinking, as though about to dodge a bullet.

"He can't, so long as you hold him tight," was the reply; "the blanket is too thick to let a bullet through."

This encouraged them somewhat, and they took hold with such a vim, that Wolcott saw that their own leader was doomed, and it was time that he decided upon his next throw in this desperate game for life.

He had kept along close in the rear of the party, but had not dared to withdraw for fear of revealing the curious deception, but the danger now was that the mistake would be detected at a moment when, if too late to save their captain, it would not be too late to send the victim originally fixed upon after him, into the midnight depths of the Lost River.

But for the rekindling of the fire, all would have been well; but this was burning so brightly that the "pit of doom" was lit up by a full, perfect glare, and it was morally certain that the mistake would be discovered at the last moment.

Reaching the crumbling edge of the cavernous opening, the men paused, none of them desirous of taking the fearful downward trip with him.

"Now, over with him!" called out Wolcott, "and be careful to hold fast to the blanket! All together!"

One! Two! Three!

And with the last swing, the body was thrown clear out over the pit, and was seen for an instant kicking, striking, and vainly clutching at space, as with a face distorted with passion, the

miserable wretch shrieked out with fearful maledictions:

"Fools! see what you have done! you have got me instead of him—" and down, down he went spinning into the Lost River, from which came faint cries, followed by a splash:—then nothing but the soft flow of the subterranean stream reached their ears.

In that brief space of time, the men saw and recognized the distorted face of their leader, and they stood like statues, transfixed with horror at what they had done. Then, by a common instinct, all turned their heads in quest of the right man.

He was gone!

"Yonder he goes!" exclaimed one, pointing at a dusky figure that was skurrying through the gloom.

"He's after a horse! head him off!"

And the whole party, howling with rage, dashed headlong after the fugitive, who, as may well be supposed, was making his legs do their "level best."

Wolcott had thrown his dirty blanket from his shoulders, at the moment Baldy was swung out into the cavern, and struck a bee-line for where his mustang was last seen cropping the stunted grass.

Reaching this spot he paused, and looked around; not a horse was visible.

It was at this juncture, that his enemies made a rush for him. Believing that it was all up, he drew his revolver, and stood at bay.

Simultaneous with their approach, he heard the whinnying, of his own mustang, who, sharper-eyed than he, had detected his master and came trotting toward him.

"Thank God for that!" was the fervent exclamation of Wolcott, as he recognized his faithful beast, and, in turn, ran to meet him.

A second after, he had vaulted upon his back, and given him the word to go.

At this very minute the raging scoundrels were within twenty feet of him. Very naturally they had laid aside their guns, while occupied with their victim; but there was a whole battery of pistols among them, and with curses, they sent a storm of bullets after the daring stranger who had so completely outwitted them.

Wolcott had expected this, and leaning forward on the neck of his horse, heard the leaden missiles whistle harmlessly over his head.

There were a couple of the villains more wise than the others. Considering it certain that the fugitive would reach the horses, they made a plunge for them, too, and were astride almost at the same moment with him.

Wolcott crouched low on his horse, until the last bullet had whizzed over his head, when, as he straightened up again, he heard the rattling clamp of horses' feet, and glancing back caught the outlines of two horsemen in pursuit.

Anxious to avoid a conflict with these two men, the young hunter put his horse to the top of his speed, with the determination of leaving them behind as fast as his mustang could accomplish it.

Knowing that both of them carried rifles, his fear was that he would be the target for both. At such a distance, he could hardly hope to escape being struck, and looked over his shoulder, often and long, ready to drop his head whenever he judged the dreaded weapon was about to be called into play.

In the dim moonlight, it was utterly impossible for him to see any such movement, but he hoped to detect the preliminary gesture in time to avoid the shot itself.

Had Wolcott possessed sufficient confidence in his own marksmanship, he would have fired from the saddle at his foremost pursuer; but, as this would have necessitated a delay upon his part, with a very dubious prospect of success, he prudently refrained from any such risk.

A few hundred yards made it certain that the contest was to be between two alone. One of the pursuers fell so rapidly in the rear, that he must have seen that he had no prospect at all of success; and he therefore drew off, sending a bullet, which did no more injury than his curses, after the fleeing horseman.

Dashing out of the grove, as did Holmes Wolcott in his mortal baste, he paid no heed to the direction of his footsteps, but after his mustang had plunged ahead for about half an hour, he saw he was nearing the ridge, over which he had already passed several times during the last couple of days.

He was rather glad to discover this, as there was a prospect of the exciting chase being terminated. The ground was rougher, and the collision would probably speedily take place.

He was approaching the ridge in a slanting

direction, and headed about so as to do so at right-angles.

In a few moments he thundered up the side of the hill, and swiftly approached the top. At the very instant of reaching the crest of the ridge, it occurred to him that his figure would be brought out in such bold relief against the sky, as to afford a most tempting target to the one who was pursuing him.

Accordingly he dropped flat again upon the back of his mustang, just as the sharp crack of a rifle broke the stillness, and the whizzing bullet slightly wounded his animal in the neck.

Over the ridge Wolcott thundered, and down the opposite side, where he instantly reined up his horse, and wheeled about so as to face his foe.

Only a few seconds, when the panting brute labored up the slope, and reaching the crest, with scarcely abated speed, started down again in hot pursuit of his victim.

At this juncture the rider detected his danger. Totally unprepared for any such thing, he had not attempted to reload his discharged weapon, so that he had nothing but his pistols to use in close quarters.

But, where he had counted upon submission, he encountered defiance; where he looked to see a "safe thing," he found something else.

The affrighted scoundrel reined up his horse so suddenly that he was thrown upon his haunches, and not over a dozen feet distant stood the panting mustang, facing square about, while upon his back sat his rider, as motionless as a statue, with his deadly rifle pointed toward him.

The baffled villain saw that his pistols were of no avail, and he was at the mercy of his foe.

"I surrender!" he called out.

"No you don't!"

Simultaneous with the words of Holmes Wolcott, his rifle was discharged, and his deadly enemy threw up his arms with a spasmodic shriek, while his riderless horse, snorting with terror, wheeled about and galloped back toward camp.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

"I SOUGHT not your life," muttered Wolcott, as he saw his enemy stiffen in the embrace of death, "and would have spared you had you let me alone, but you hunted me like a dog, and you may die the death of a dog."

And without looking again at the figure, he spurred his horse into an easy gallop, and was speedily beyond sight of the terrifying object.

The mustang was trotting in a direction parallel to the ridge, and thinking that perhaps his enemies would continue the pursuit, even though at a distance, with the hope of being in at the death of their prey, he rode to the top of the ridge, and looked back in the direction of the camp-fire twinkling in the distance.

He saw no signs of life, but listening intently, he fancied he detected the tramp of a horse's feet. To make sure, he dismounted and placed his ear to the ground.

Yes; he could hear the regular *clampety-clamp* of a horse under full gallop, but it was so far away that he could not hope to discern it for some time, even if it were coming in a straight line toward him.

"I'll not wait," he concluded, "for it will only necessitate another mortal combat."

However, he descended the ridge on the western side, which was the one toward the campfire, from which he had so wonderfully escaped. He occasionally glanced in that direction, and now and then paused and listened, so that no enemy might steal upon him unawares.

But he heard nothing additional, and saw no more of his enemies. Even when he reined up and listened, he could hear nothing of the rattling hoofs that had caught his ears a few minutes before.

Concluding that he had nothing more to fear from the scoundrels who had striven so assiduously for his death, he gave them no further thought for the present, deeming it best, however, to put a goodly number of miles between him and them during the favoring darkness of the night.

When morning dawned, Wolcott was out of sight of the grove in which he had met such a thrilling adventure, and was among the wooded hills and ridges that came down to the edge of the river, opposite the Indian village, where he had seen the unknown captive start on her way down the Lost River.

He had now resolved to give his whole attention to securing an interview with her. Once in her presence, with no one else near, he be-

lieved he could persuade her of his love, and induce her to flee with him to a home where she was free from all danger, and where unalloyed happiness only awaited her.

He had overcome one great obstacle in making it known to the girl that some one was seeking her. She would be prepared for his reappearance and would understand what otherwise would be inexplicable to her.

This was securing good ground to work upon—this was opening the ball, but there still remained the great work itself—that of rescuing her—to do.

He shrunk from making the voyage down the Lost River. There must be danger there, and he was totally ignorant and unprepared to meet it.

It was his wish to attract the attention of the maiden, outside of the river, where he could scheme and maneuver, secure of the ground upon which he was traveling; for this reason, he determined to make his way to the same point from which he had gained his first view of the Mohave village.

He selected the densest portion of the wooded hills—a sort of valley, where he deemed himself safe from intrusion, and here he removed all the trappings from his mustang and turned him loose.

The horse was so well trained that he had no fear of his wandering away, unless frightened by the incursion of some wild animal or stranger, when he would be certain to make himself as "scarce" as possible.

Taking good note of the ground, so that he would not forget it himself, he made his way toward the post of observation on the bank of the river.

The hardships which he had encountered in the Californian solitudes had so toughened and invigorated our hero that he felt able to bear a vast amount of privation, and he resolved to spend the entire day, without devoting a moment to procuring food.

It was yet early in the forenoon when he reached the river bank and peered cautiously across the stream to the opposite shore.

Everything seemed the same as before, with the difference that nothing was to be seen of her whom he was so ardently seeking.

The same squaws appeared to be passing to and fro, and the same sprightly children were frolicking in and out among the lodges. Some half a dozen warriors, too, were observed moving idly to and fro, but he looked in vain for some evidence of the beautiful unknown captive.

"She will return during the day," he reflected, "and I will keep watch for her."

The fact that she had returned at least once before proved that there must be some outlet to the river—or, more properly, some avenue, by which the upper earth was reached, without attempting the impossible feat of returning upstream.

But the affair of yesterday must be known among the Mohaves, and a similar opportunity for the lover could not occur again; he must seek some other means of obtaining communication with her.

"We will jointly decide upon a way of outwitting these red skins," he murmured, in his glowing love, presuming upon his success with the fair one who held his heart enthralled.

As there were no indications of her presence among the villagers, Wolcott occupied himself in conjecturing which lodge she occupied when here, for that she spent a part of her time among these red-skins, he considered settled by what he had witnessed.

"Of course, they treat her like a queen, for no queen could surpass her regal presence," was the conclusion of the devoted lover; "therefore, the handsomest lodge in the entire village must be hers. I noticed she came from the upper end of the town and there is where I shall search for it."

He had no difficulty in deciding upon the proper one. The very last lodge on the right was higher, and more artistically made than the others; it was just the place that one would have searched for the leading personage of a tribe.

"The chief, I have been told, always has his home in the center of the town, so that can not be his, and, if not his, it must be hers."

This was a very natural conclusion, but, at the same time, it was based upon some exceedingly doubtful premises.

"Good heavens!" suddenly exclaimed Wolcott, "suppose she is married!"

A cold chill of horror ran over him at the bare thought, but a few minutes later he dismissed it as unworthy of a moment's credence.

"She marry a loathsome Indian! What could have put such an idea in my head? Perish the shameful thought! No; she is as pure as the snow-drop and would die first!"

Having settled himself into a good position for taking observations, the next thing Holmes Wolcott did was to fall sound asleep. He had been through so much during the last few days that he was pretty well exhausted, and despite the exciting incidents he had to occupy his mind, his slumber lasted several hours.

When he awoke the sun had passed the meridian, and it was with no little chagrin that he considered what might have transpired directly before his eyes.

But carefully scrutinizing the village, he could detect no material difference in its appearance, from what he had noticed in the morning, so that he concluded nothing of interest had occurred.

His searching eye detected under the bank, near the upper end of the village, a small canoe which had escaped his attention before.

"It may have been there," he reflected, "but if it was not it looks as though there had been a visitor during my sleep."

Two objects now claimed his attention—the canoe and the lodge which he had fixed upon as the residence of the fair and unknown maiden.

"If she is in the village she must show herself pretty soon, and I am not going to sleep on watch again."

But the long summer afternoon waned, and not a movement indicated that such a personage was in the Mohave village. Still he was not prepared to believe that she was absent, and he resolved, as he saw the shadows of night closing around him, that he would reconnoiter the village in person.

He believed, that during the favoring darkness, he could approach the lodge without detection, as these Mohaves were in such a remote part of the Californian territory that they had nothing to fear from any incursion of their enemies.

The difficulty was in crossing the river. He could easily swim, but he had a dread of drenching his clothes, and there was no canoe upon his side. He decided to pass up-stream some distance for the most favorable crossing point, and there see whether he could collect material for a raft, or something that would float him over.

He was more fortunate than he had reason to hope. A short distance above he found a decayed log, lying half on the land and half in the water, which looked of sufficient buoyancy to bear his weight. Breaking off a sapling fully twenty feet in length, he disengaged his novel raft, and made the venture.

The river was quite broad, but the current was not very rapid, and he made good progress. As he approached the middle of the stream, the depth rapidly increased, until he could scarcely touch bottom at all.

This, however, was only for a short distance. The water became quite shallow, and he finally reached the opposite bank without having lost much distance, and dry shod.

By this time it was fairly dark, and he was but a short distance from the Mohave village, liable to meet some of the red-skins at any moment. Being without his horse, a vast deal depended upon his own caution and skill in keeping out of sight of his lynx-eyed enemies.

The Mohave village was surrounded, except in front, by the same rugged, hilly woods, through which the moonlight was only able partially to penetrate; but when Wolcott arrived in the vicinity, he found the lodges all exposed to view, while numbers of shadowy figures could be discovered, flitting in and out among them.

He approached to the edge of the clearing, when he stood within twenty yards of the lodge which he had selected as her residence, but whether to attempt a nearer approach or not was a question which was hard to decide.

"What if I do reach it unseen—what can I do?" he asked himself. "If she is in there, it is more than likely that there are others—'Sh!'"

A figure closely wrapped came out of the lodge, and stood in such a position that it was impossible to distinguish it clearly; but Holmes was almost certain that it was she herself.

"She may be looking for me; she will understand a signal."

And he gave utterance to a faint, trilling whistle, altogether oblivious of the fact that there were other ears as likely to hear it as hers.

But she heard it and turned her head, as if to inquire what it meant. Wolcott's heart gave a

great bound, as he was sure the moment of rescue was at hand.

Again he uttered the whistle, a little more decidedly than before, and could it be possible?

Yes, she was coming toward him!

Never had he felt more like fainting in all his life; his heart throbbed painfully, and he caught his breath to keep down his excitement.

The figure was closely wrapped in a blanket, which, when she had come a short distance, she threw aside, and showed herself to be a middle-aged squaw!

"Gracious alive!" gasped the adventurer, as he stood in mute amazement for a moment, and then recalling his peril skurried off in the darkness, out of reach of the affectionate female Mohave.

"Who knows," he asked himself, with a grim humor, "but what I should have made myself liable for breach of promise had I remained longer?"

This incident, trivial in itself, served the purpose of convincing Wolcott that the captive maiden was not in the village at all—nor had she been there during the day.

"There is some place down the Lost River, where she makes her home, and it is there I am going to look for her. All I want is a canoe."

Such being the case, he set about procuring one at once. That which he had seen lying under the bank suggested itself, and he determined that if such a thing were possible he would borrow it for that purpose.

This, however, was attended with no little difficulty and danger, as it would probably be missed and immediately searched for.

After thinking over the matter, he decided to capture it if he could, and take it up-stream, cross and carry it ashore. By doing this there was a prospect of successfully deceiving the Mohaves, who, believing it had drifted loose, would naturally suppose that it had gone down-stream, and if unable to find it, would be certain that it had vanished down the Lost River.

Wolcott counted on being able to carry it any distance he wished overland, and launching it at a point out of sight of the village, make the great descent of the mysterious stream.

This was too perilous an undertaking to be performed at night, and no matter if the canoe were obtained at once, he was prudent enough to wait until he could have the aid of the friendly sunlight.

Still averse to entering the water, he approached the shore again, hoping to secure the canoe without discovery. There it lay, where he had seen it first, but so dangerously near the lodges that he might well pause before moving from cover and seizing it. In fact, it was directly in front of the lodge he had mistaken for hers.

Moving back into the wood again, he made his way to the edge of the river, and then crept as stealthily as a panther toward the canoe. His heart trembled as he laid his hand upon the prow and felt it glide along the shingle under the slight pull he exerted.

Not daring to enter it, he pulled it slowly and silently along the shore until he had ascended the river for the distance of a hundred yards or thereabouts, by which time he felt warranted in rising to the upright position, and using less care.

A little further up he raised the canoe in his arms, finding it so light as to be of no inconvenience at all.

Striding rapidly forward, he waited until he had reached a perfectly safe point, when he prepared to launch; and, as he did so, discovered that he had either lost the paddle or failed to bring it with him.

At first he was disposed to go back and search for it, but this seemed like inviting the danger he had taken such pains to avoid, and he had recourse to the sapling that had done him such good service in crossing on the fallen tree.

With the aid of this he succeeded in reaching the other bank undiscovered, and he began to feel quite sanguine of success. Remarkable good fortune had attended him thus far; why would it not continue to do so?

The morrow would show.

CHAPTER IX.

DOWN THE LOST RIVER!

One probability gave Holmes Wolcott considerable uneasiness.

Despite the great care he had used in capturing the canoe, he could not prevent himself from leaving traces behind him, that the sharp eyes of the Mohaves would be quick to detect. Here and there, where he had walked along shore, the ground was soft and marshy, and a

such places the imprint of his feet was sure to be as distinct as though the trail was purposely made for the guidance of the Indians.

Following this up, as he believed they would do, they would see where he had entered the boat, and suspecting he had crossed the river, would make a search of the opposite shore.

Would they follow up and detect him?

This was the question that so disturbed our hero that he was unable to sleep during the night. Carrying the canoe a considerable distance on his shoulders, he deposited it close to the edge of the water under the shelter of some overhanging bushes, and then returned to his post of observation.

The first glance showed him that the loss of the canoe had been discovered. He could see numbers of shadowy figures moving along shore and hurrying in a way that proved they were searching for something.

By and by a number of torches were brought, and they reflected the hideous faces of the stooping figures; the scene had a ghastly and un-earthly look that was sufficiently repelling.

Suddenly, three short, sharp whoops announced the discovery of the footprints of the thief. He was a white man, too—some daring scout who had penetrated to the very heart of the hostile country, and thus insulted them to their very faces.

Then the flaming torches ran rapidly up the bank; the eagle-eyed Mohaves could follow the trail, like so many bloodhounds, and, in an incredibly short space of time, they reached the point where the canoe had started across-stream. Here the torches gyrated for awhile, as if the eager red-skins were seeking to solve some perplexing question.

So they were, and they were not long about it either. Having found the paddle, they were desirous of learning how their foe made his way to the other bank. It was impossible for our friend to cover his track, and the decayed tree resting against the bank told the fact that a pole had been resorted to as a means of propulsion, and that the foe they were so anxious to punish for his temerity, was to be found somewhere upon the other bank.

There were more canoes in a village of this size, and they were forthcoming. Three long, dark boats, under the guidance of a dozen times as many powerful arms, shot across the river, each one bearing a flaming torch at the bow.

They certainly were about to take the true trail of Holmes Wolcott, and, as this personage realized the important fact, he concluded it was high time for him to do something.

There was only one way of giving these gentry the slip, and that was by taking to the water. Believing the Mohaves would speedily be upon the spot where he stood, Wolcott hurried down-stream as fast as he could travel, and reaching the canoe stepped into it and shoved off-shore.

The woods threw out quite a belt of shadow, which afforded him a much needed shelter. He plied the pole with all the strength at his command, and, assisted by the current, made quite rapid progress down-stream.

The fugitive determined that if his pursuers pressed him too closely he would take to the land again, and plunge into the undergrowth, and, if driven to a last resort, would mount his horse and flee; but the torches were only a temporary expedient, and it was not to be supposed they could be made of any use in a real hot chase of a foe.

Continually looking back up-stream, he caught sight of the starlike points of light, twinkling in a way which showed they were far from stationary. The Mohaves were in their boats, and following swiftly after him.

Suddenly the lights were extinguished—every one was blotted out, as though they had been thrust simultaneously beneath the water.

And what was the meaning of that?

Mayhap they began to suspect that they were making too good targets of themselves, as they approached close to their foe.

The situation of Wolcott was becoming critical in the extreme. As matters were, he would speedily be beyond the protection of the wood, out in the open river, with little prospect of ultimate escape, except by making a night journey down the Lost River—a proceeding that would be very much like "jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire."

In the mean time he pushed ahead. With such a light craft as the Indian canoe, the paddle was far preferable to the pole. Here and there the bottom of the river was so spongy, that the pole sunk deep into it and almost checked the progress altogether.

Holmes peered through the gloom, watching for the first glimpse of the pursuing boats, but still they remained invisible. Finally he paused, and sat down in the boat and listened.

Instantly a curious sound struck upon his ear. In the still night he could hear the dip of the Mohave paddles—but above that, and from a different direction, came a murmur of voices—low, coarse, disjointed utterances, as of evil, plotting men.

Wolcott had now reached the point where the river debouched from the ridges and hills and flowed across the open prairie; and just beyond, on the side which he still "hugged," he saw some six or eight horsemen, approaching on a moderate walk.

Fortunately the young man was so near the bank, that by lowering his head in the canoe, he hoped to escape observation. As they came nearer, he was able to distinguish their words.

"He's somwhar among these hills," remarked one of them; "he played us a blamed nice trick, and we must git even with him."

"He made us send poor Baldy to the bottom of the river, and then he wiped out Snaffler, by some underhanded means," growled a second.

This was the party that had been so cleverly outwitted by Wolcott, in their attempt upon his life the preceding day, and inspired by the wish for revenge, they had been searching for him during most of the time, without the object of it all suspecting so much.

"It's qua'r how we lost his trail," continued the first speaker; "it looks as though he'd been coverin' up his tracks."

"Can't do't; he's somwhar 'bout these parts, and it'll be powerful qua'r ef we don't run afoul of the—"

"Helloa! what's that?" interrupted another. "Skulp me if it ain't a canoe."

"Anybody in it? No," said the first, answering his own question; but what does it mean?"

"I'll bet thar's a red a-layin' down in it; he's cottedch sight of us and jist flopped."

The party all had come to a halt, and were surveying the boat.

"That's sun'sthin' in it," remarked one of the men; "any fool can tell that, the way the blamed thing sinks down in the water."

"Can't yer wade out and fotch it in? Then we kin tell; try it, Bill."

"Scarcely; I ain't so anxious to wake up a nest of hornets, as to poke my nose into that nest."

"Better give it a bullet; that'll wake 'im up ef he's asleep, and ef he's awake it'll put him to sleep. What do you say, John?"

"I'm not pertickler; I only wish it was the chap that we're a-s'archin' fur, then we'd give him a broadside. If you want to fire, blaze away."

It was a fearful moment to Holmes Wolcott, who, stretched out on his back in the bottom of the canoe, knew that a bullet would clip its way through the sides of the canoe, as though they were so much card-paper.

His only hope seemed to be in the slender one that the bullet would miss him; but, as the scoundrel was in the very act of raising the gun, "John" interposed in a hushed, eager voice:

"Look out! yonder's the ginooine article, sure!"

He had caught sight of the three canoes descending the river, in each of which could be discerned a number of Indians.

Here was a prospect of a collision at once, and the hunters galloped forward so as to be within good range of the Mohaves; the latter, nothing reluctant, gave utterance to their defiant whoops and fired several shots, by way of apprising their foes of their temper.

It was the golden opportunity for him who was lying in his canoe; and, after drifting a short distance further down-stream, he cautiously raised himself to the sitting position and took the pole in hand again.

The yells, shouts, curses, groans and reports of firearms filled the air, and showed that the combatants had joined in, and were fighting with all the ferocity of wild tigers. Implacable enemies at all times, each party was in a vengeful mood, and ready to do battle with the other, even unto death itself.

Wolcott continued his downward course, until he had passed far beyond sight of the combatants, although by looking back he could see the flash of their guns, and the tumult of the battle reached his ears with frightful distinctness.

As he neared the dark cavern, down which the river was lost, he kept close to the shore, having no desire to make the journey during the appalling gloom in which the river was necessarily enveloped at the present time.

Wolcott had seen enough, and still had sufficient on his mind to absorb all his thoughts; but, for all that, he was compelled to see that he had presumed too much upon his endurance, and, before attempting anything more, it was necessary that he should obtain some food.

There were so many obstacles in the way of hunting down and cooking game in such a locality as this, that Holmes determined to make an effort to secure some food by stratagem—that is, by obtaining some which had previously been gotten by another party.

The most feasible plan was that of visiting the camp lately occupied by his enemies. This was a goodly distance, but he hoped to make it in a couple of hours, by brisk walking, and there was not much danger, as it was more than probable that all had left the camp, and were engaged with the Mohaves.

Approaching as near to the river opening as he deemed prudent, he landed and drew the canoe up the bank, where there was no likelihood of the current disturbing it, and then he started across the prairie, taking the direction which he judged would lead him to the clump of trees, which had already been the scene of so many eventful incidents to him.

There was no twinkling light to guide him, but the clear sky, and a habit of close observation enabled him to keep to the right course, and in considerable less space than two hours, he reached the very spot for which he was searching.

His heart sunk, as it seemed that he was about being disappointed, but by moving carefully around, he discerned some ashes, which being raked over, disclosed the smoldering coals beneath. Upon these, he ventured to throw some dead wood that had been collected, which, flaming up, revealed the surroundings with great distinctness.

Among the *debris* of the camp, were found enough fragments of food to feed the famishing man, who felt amply repaid for the long walk he had taken to procure it. Having satisfied himself that he could hold no more, he started on his return, striking directly across the open prairie.

The sound of the conflict between the whites and Mohaves had long since ended. All was still, except the soft murmur of the Lost River, as it made its way to its mysterious bed far down in the depths of the earth.

Wolcott walked along very slowly and moderately. He was reflecting upon the wonderful scenes of the last few days, and wondering whether he was to succeed in extricating himself from the net-work of danger by which he was surrounded.

And would he be able to secure an audience with the beautiful captive? Would it be his fate to visit her wonderful home down beneath the surface of the earth?

What would the morrow bring forth—success or failure—life or death?

Nothing more was seen or heard of his white enemies. They had most certainly had a severe encounter with the Mohaves, and had as certainly lost some of their number. Those who had failed had probably taken themselves away in too crippled a condition to be of much account hereafter. Wolcott concluded that with ordinary prudence there was nothing more to be feared from them.

As near as he could judge, when he reached the canoe again it was fully midnight. Lying down beside the boat, he speedily fell asleep, not waking until morning.

He started up bewildered and alarmed, but looking about saw nothing of any living creature. The prairie, wood and stream were clear in every direction.

The time had come to make his journey down the Lost River, and he was ready. Shoving his canoe out into the water, he gave it to the influence of the current, which rapidly bore it downward.

Swifter and swifter it went, and his heart thrilled with strange emotions as he saw himself so rapidly approaching the yawning cavern.

Faster, faster—there was no turning back now even if he desired it—a prayer to God, and Holmes Wolcott shot like an arrow down the Lost River.

CHAPTER X.

A WONDERFUL VOYAGE.

THE faculties of Holmes Wolcott seemed supernaturally acute as he fairly began his journey down the Lost River, and he took in the minutest of his surroundings on this the most memorable voyage of his life.

The dark covering of earth was arched over

him, interspersed here and there with large stones and pebbles, and his first emotion was that he was entering some vast cave like the Mammoth one of Kentucky.

There was a peculiar ecstatic thrill as he saw how swiftly he was going with the current, and a sort of recklessness came over him as he reflected that he cared very little where he was going, or what became of him.

The gloom rapidly deepened until it was dark all around him, and a chill was in the air, such as is frequently felt beneath the surface of the earth. With something like awe, he gave utterance to a suppressed shout. The echoes were repeated until they sounded like the gibbering of spirits about him.

Then he whistled a bar of a tune; it was caught up and warbled again, as the hunter of the Alps frequently hears the sound of his horn returned to him. Then he splashed and spathis hand in the water, and it sounded so loud that he was startled.

Looking back, the huge, cavernous opening by which he had entered seemed no larger than the mouth of a columbiad. Indeed, it appeared as if his head ought to have grazed the top in passing beneath the roof.

Lifting the pole—which was fully a dozen feet in length—from beside him, he attempted to reach bottom. Down, down it went until the upper end was even with the surface, but it met with no obstruction. The river was fathomless, with any appliances at his command.

Suddenly something jarred the boat, and reaching out his hand it touched the cold, crumbling side of the cavern. So swift was he gliding that the boat spun around, and came very nearly overturning from the contact of its bow with the earth. He was going at an astonishing speed.

But look! it is growing light in front of him. The surface of the deep, swiftly-flowing river begins to become visible; rays of light seem to be shooting down through an opening overhead. Surely this must be the rent through which Puff Brown and Baldy fell into the deep river!

How high it looked! Away up above, with a bright, yellowish sort of light, which told where the bright sun was shedding its rays.

There is a rough, jagged look about it, but it appears scarcely big enough to admit the passage of a man's body, to say nothing of that of a horse.

Wolcott raises his eyes as he shoots beneath it. He catches a momentary glimpse of the branches of trees, and then it is behind him again. There seems to be something moving about on the surface of the earth, for some gravelly dirt crumbles down, and strikes upon his head like so much hail.

The light from the opening appears to be following the spell-bound fugitive. He can see far ahead into the twilight gloom which rapidly deepens into the midnight blackness beyond.

The stream is very narrow, a little more than a hundred feet in width, and it must be of immense depth to flow with such a great and noiseless velocity.

It seemed as if danger was on every hand, and now Wolcott is forced to witness a terrible scene, which for a few moments makes him despair of life.

There is a sudden rumbling like thunder overhead—a tremulous, muffled sound, such as is made by the multitudinous tramping of feet, and then the gloom is suddenly relieved by the breaking in of a volume of light.

Wolcott raises his head and sees a huge body furiously struggling on the edge of the crumbling opening, which sends down showers of dust and stones; but the hold cannot be retained, and then the huge bulk of a buffalo is seen descending, stern foremost, pawing the air, and bellowing in his terror. He strikes with a splash that sends the water high up on every side of him, and the waves of which rock the little canoe, six feet distant from where he fell, with a violence that imminently threatens its safety.

The buffalo goes far down into the deep water, but he is a swimmer, and speedily reappears on the surface. The light which he has let into the arched roof of the Lost River shows him the tiny canoe speeding down the stream, and with a snort of fear, he makes straight for it, as the drowning man catches at a straw.

But one touch of that hoof is sufficient to overturn the frail boat, and it would never do to give him the opportunity. Wolcott has no paddle with which to propel his canoe beyond his reach, so he brandishes the pole, shouts and splashes the water into the eyes of the frenzied animal.

It is enough. Fairly crazy by this time, with great terror he wheels about, when scarcely more than an arm's length away, and swims powerfully against the current, in his bewilderment going round and round in a circle, seeking in vain for some rest for his hoofs.

As soon as this immediate danger had passed, Holmes looked back, expecting to see more of the animals fall through. But this buffalo must have been a wanderer from the main herd, and was the only one that had chanced to step upon the weak spot that had let him through. Here and there were treacherous pieces of crust, which let down those who trusted to them, and it had been the fortune of this fellow to share the fate of human beings who had gone the way before him.

But the rumbling of feet overhead was still plainly audible, and appeared to communicate a tremor to the canoe itself. Wolcott was sure that some of them would be through again, and more than likely would come down with their crushing weight full upon him. Crouching down in the center of the canoe, he held himself ready to leap over at the first sight of one of these monsters "coming for him."

It was only for a few seconds that this dreadful danger lasted. The rumbling grew fainter and fainter, and finally died out altogether. The thundering herd had passed, and there was nothing more to be apprehended from them.

But when and where was this journey to end? Our hero had seen nothing of any thing that looked like a resting-place for any one in descending the river. Could it be that he had passed it in the gloom? Was there some entrance to it, known only to those who had been instructed? And where, he asked himself a score of times, did the river itself find a terminus? Was there some subterranean Sahara in which it finally lost itself? Or did it pass on, for many miles, deeper and deeper in the earth, until, when its waters rose, they mingled with those of the Pacific?

At any rate, let them go and lose themselves wherever they might, it was a fearful apprehension that he had reached the point where it was not only too late to save himself but too late to turn back.

There was no facing such a current as this, and nothing was to be gained by catching at the sides of the cavern. A man could not remain there forever. No; there was some safe outlet somewhere from this subterranean stream, and Wolcott wondered that he had not discovered it, when he attempted to follow the course of the river, by its course above the earth.

He wondered, too, that he had seen nothing of those who were returning. The beautiful maiden and her companions must have made their way back overland; how was it that he had not seen them, or discovered any traces of their passage hither?

These were questions which seethed through his brain and made it hard for him to decide whether he was really frightened, or whether he actually enjoyed the novel experience.

At times, it seemed to him as though this was all a dream—a vivid vision of sleep, and it was only when by touching his own person, that he made sure he was in this subterranean world.

But look!

He saw light again. What could it mean? Had some unfortunate man or animal broken through the treacherous ground again? No; there was no sound of disturbance, but another thing. He was nearing a sort of lagoon or lake. The river broadened out until it was hundreds of yards in width, and near the center he was enabled to see a sort of island, covered with a soft, luxuriant vegetation and bathed in the fairy, subdued light that filtered through the earth above.

Here was his destination! This was the mysterious home visited by the captive and the Mohaves, and from which there was some exit still unknown and unsuspected by himself. Yes; here was the island retreat, where he hoped to find her for whom he was ready to peril his life.

The light which made visible this extraordinary phenomenon, was somewhat different from that which our hero had observed before. There were apparently a dozen windows through which, mild and suffused, it found its way down to the island below, with enough revivifying power to cause an almost tropical richness of vegetation.

The upper end of the island was studded with a species of short but luxuriant trees, which, in the position of Wolcott, (low down upon the surface of the water) prevented his seeing what lay beyond. Had he possessed control over his boat, he would have been glad to skirt along the

shore of the island, contemplating its wonders before landing.

But several considerations prevented. There was danger of drifting into the great unknown beyond; and, as there were undoubtedly Indians upon the island, it would place a stranger in rather a compromising position.

The current was favorable, and using his pole as a sort of paddle, he found he was going to strike the very point he wished—that is, upon the uppermost point of the island, where he was not liable to be seen by any who might be below him.

He found he was moving very slowly, and when he thrust his pole into the water, it found bottom at a depth of no more than four feet. Somehow or other this gave a confidence to Wolcott, who, shortly after, sprung lightly ashore.

"Landed at last," he murmured, "and how am I ever to reach the upper world again?"

He stood a moment wrapped in solemn meditation, and then rousing himself to the practical dangers of his situation, he pulled the canoe up the bank, and carefully concealed it in the undergrowth, where it was not likely to attract the attention of any following after him.

"We may have other visitors from the outer world," he reflected, "and I must not forget to prepare for them!"

If this were really the island for which he was searching, the probabilities were that there were other persons upon it, and if such a thing were possible, it was his purpose to keep invisible from them, as all were certain to be enemies—except her for whom he was searching, and who, he fervently hoped, would prove in the end, "more than a friend" to him.

The ground upon which he was walking he found to be soft and rather yielding, but after advancing a few yards it became firmer, and seemed to abound with a sort of hard gravel, which in no way impeded the luxuriant vegetation.

Finding himself almost directly beneath the sieve-like opening, through which a portion of the sunlight came, Wolcott peered upward in the hope of learning the explanation. Something in the appearance above him led him to believe that the chasms above opened into a sort of sparse wood, which, while admitting the sunlight, still, by means of its branches, so diffused it as to give the effect alluded to.

Advancing with the same caution, he speedily reached a point from which he gained quite an extensive view of this wonderful island. It was oval in shape, between three and four hundred yards in length, and the greater portion was covered with grass, and rich, green-looking vegetation, but of no great height. The upper end was thickly studded with trees, as I have already intimated, and little groups of them were scattered here and there over the island, which, with the thick grass and dense vegetation, afforded shelter in which a hundred men might have hid themselves with great ease.

But the most interesting sight to our hero was that of four well-constructed Indian lodges of bark, standing near the left-hand edge of the island, and at a distance of about two hundred yards from where he was cautiously viewing them.

Their make and general appearance proved them to be of Mohave construction, and there was little doubt but that they were occupied, although not a soul was seen in motion near them.

While Wolcott was scrutinizing these buildings with an intensity of interest which it would be difficult to describe, he discerned a small canoe, making its way down the shore in front of the lodges.

It had evidently come from these, and the two men seated in it were leaving the island, with the intention of going to the upper world again. The island itself speedily shut them from view, but the fact of their moving off in the manner narrated, proved that the place where the ascent was made to the surface of the earth, was some distance below, so that this, the only means of escape, was not irretrievably cut off from our hero.

Twice the latter caught indistinct glimpses of figures moving among the lodges, but he could not identify them, and he began to grow impatient.

"Is she here?" he asked himself again and again. "If so, who are guarding her? Can not I present myself boldly before her?"

A half-hour now passed by with great impatience to him, and then his heart gave a great thrill as she suddenly appeared walking toward him. She was clad in the same Indian garments, with her head bent, and a large blanket

over her shoulders descending to her feet. Her manner showed that she was carrying something beneath the blanket, about which she was quite solicitous.

She walked slowly up the island, her course changing somewhat as she advanced, so that she was likely to pass a few yards to the right of the trembling, amazed Wolcott.

But she had not yet ceased walking, when a figure came out from the thick undergrowth and advanced to meet her.

Holmes Wolcott uttered a gasp of terror. Could he believe the evidence of his own senses? That rotund-looking figure, with its peculiar half-sporting dress, could belong to but one person—and that person was—Puffy Brown.

CHAPTER XI.

AN OLD FRIEND AND AN OLD ENEMY.

What lingering doubts Wolcott may have had regarding his vision were quickly removed by a sight of the man's face. It was that of Puffy Brown, his lost friend, and no mistake.

Surprise held our hero spellbound for a few moments, during which he watched the scene before him.

As Puff stepped forth the maiden looked up, smiled and greeted him, and, in that moment of supreme happiness at finding his dear friend alive and well, Wolcott felt a pang of jealousy at the look she gave him.

"They are lovers already," he concluded, "and all my toil is for nothing."

When only an arm's length separated them, the maiden paused and drew forth the bundle from beneath her blanket, and handed it to him. Puffy took it, bowed his head by way of acknowledgment, opened and began eating, in a way that, if a lover, he was not a sentimental, but a most matter-of-fact one.

This pantomime told a story in itself. Puffy had reached the island, had discovered the maiden (or she had discovered him), and he was remaining concealed upon the place, where the Indians knew nothing regarding him, and where she acted the part of the good Samaritan and furnished him with food.

Puffy had always borne the reputation of a healthy eater, and he proved himself worthy of that reputation on the present occasion. To put it mildly, he ate a tremendous breakfast, and wiped his cheeks in a way which showed he enjoyed it like a true epicure.

The meal finished, Puffy passed the bundle back to his friend, who placed it beneath her blanket again and moved over toward Wolcott.

"Gracious alive! is she going to bring it to me?" he gasped, as he shrank back out of sight.

But she passed directly by the trembling young man, and halted at about the same distance on the other side of him, where a second individual came out to meet her.

And who was this second man? No less a personage than the scoundrel "Baldy," who had attempted the life of Holmes Wolcott, and had been cast into the river by mistake!

"It seems that making a plunge through the upper earth into the river is no Sam Patch leap after all," thought the young man, as he furtively watched the two. "There's that first-class scamp, looking as well and hearty as when I first met him around his own camp-fire. I wonder what her opinion is of him?"

She was taking food to him in the same manner, and he ate voraciously as a wolf. When he had finished he drew his hand across his mouth and said:

"Thar's only one thing more I orter have to make that a bully meal."

"What is it?" she asked, innocently.

"A kiss from them sweet lips of yours," he answered, stepping toward her. But she recoiled, and putting up her hands, exclaimed:

"Don't! don't!"

"Why not?" he asked, stopping and looking impudently at her.

"You have no right to presume upon my friendship in that way."

"But where's the harm?" he continued, in the same insolent way. "Come, now, don't be offish—what's the use?"

"You must not."

"Hang it, I will."

"If you come any nearer I will scream out and bring some of the Mohaves here."

This threat checked the painful scene, and the villain drew surlily back, just as the excited Holmes Wolcott was on the point of leaping forward and striking him to the earth.

Having eaten his breakfast, the fellow drew back into cover, and vanished from view, while she—the angel of the island, as she might be termed—turned about and walked sadly back toward the lodges from which she had come.

"Now I will go and hunt up Puff," murmured Wolcott, as he turned about and found the genial face of his old friend smiling at his elbow.

"How are you, my dear fellow?" said the genial Puff, as he extended his fat, warm hand. "I was expecting you."

"God be thanked!" exclaimed Wolcott, as he wrung his hand. "What earthly joy is there like finding a friend alive, whom you had given up for dead?"

The tears filled the eyes of both, as utterance became impossible, and they could only wring each other's hands in silence.

"Now we will sit down and talk over matters," as they seated themselves upon the soft grass side by

side; "first tell me what happened to you after I left rather suddenly the other night."

Wolcott did so, in as few words as possible.

"Now, how has it gone with you, dear Puff?"

"You know how I broke through—I and my horse. I awoke just as I started, but too late to help myself, so we went on."

"It was a dreadful, a horrible sensation, that sinking, sinking through the chilly air, and then down, down, down into the cold waters of the Lost River. They are very deep, for it seemed to me I went fully fifty feet, before I touched bottom, and I thought my lungs would burst before I could reach the surface again; but I came up at last, and found I was going down-stream, as if I were in a mill-race.

"I didn't see anything of my horse and haven't seen him since. I suppose he attempted to swim against the current, became bewildered and was drowned. I lost my rifle and hat, and made up my mind that I was lost myself; but, like a drowning man, I determined to keep up as long as I had the power.

"There was only one thing I could do, and that was to keep afloat and let the current take me where it chose.

"By and by the darkness began to light up, and I caught sight of this island, and at the same moment I recalled the Indian we had seen going down in the canoe, and the sight and recollection put a little hope into my heart.

"I saw from the direction I was taking, that I would have to do some pretty hard swimming to make the upper end of the island, so I struck out with might and main, and I succeeded; but, when I pulled myself out of the water, I was so used up that I just stretched out on my face, and puffed—never puffed so in all my life. I really felt the island respond, just as a little cart will do, when a panting dog is fast to it, and stops to rest. At last I rolled over on my side and went to sleep.

"In about two hours I awoke, and found Genevieve standing near me—"

"Who is Genevieve?" inquired his deeply-interested listener.

"The young lady that brought out my grub to me. You know, my dear boy, I am celebrated for my gallantry to my mother's sex, and the minute I saw this young lady (and she is good-looking certainly) I hoped to my feet and attempted to take off my hat; but, as that was gone already, my essay in that direction didn't amount to much, and I could only murmur my pleasure at meeting her, and inquire if all her friends were well.

"However, to make a matter short, about which I know you are deeply interested, I learned that she dwelt with the family of a Mohave brave upon the island—"

"Not as his wife, surely?"

"No, no; she has been a captive some four or five years, but lives in the hope of getting away again. She said about a dozen made their home upon the island, and four of them only were men, but they were the fiercest kind of warriors, and would hack me to pieces if they found I was here."

"So it was agreed that I should hide in the bushes and she would bring food to me until a safe way was found for me to escape. Then I told her, after giving her the particulars of my descent, that I expected you here certainly, as you had nobly resolved to rescue her, and, at the time I left you, you were making your preparations to hunt for this island."

"How did she take it?"

"There! there! don't blush so. I can say she was deeply interested, but somehow or other she don't seem to think there is much chance of our doing anything to help her out of this scrape."

"Have you told me all you know about her?"

"Well, pretty much all. I haven't asked her a great deal, for two reasons. In the first place, she doesn't seem to care much about talking, and in the next place, I wished to leave something for you to do in that line."

"You said she had been among the Mohaves some five or six years, I believe."

"Five years. Her parents, she thinks, live in Los Angeles and believe her dead, and she knows not whether they are dead or not. She was captured by a band of Mohaves that galloped near her father's hacienda, and were off again before any one knew it."

"What is her Christian name?"

"Mecheana; somehow or other, it seems to me, I have heard that name before."

"So you have!" exclaimed Wolcott, in no little excitement; "don't you remember that excursion we made out on the suburbs of Los Angeles, and that fine mansion which so attracted our admiration that we drove in and called upon the proprietor? And have you forgotten how kindly he treated us, and how when we left he pressed us to stay longer, to call again, and said Senor Mecheana's doors were always open to us?"

"Of course I remember it!" replied Puff, his round face all aglow at the pleasing recollection. "What an old fool I was to forget it! But, then, when a fellow is made to puff like me, he ain't apt to remember much of anything. Certainly, certainly, and you will have all the pleasure of imparting this good tidings to her, and I'm sure she'll feel a little tender toward you for it."

"But there is another person here," said Wolcott, jerking his thumb over toward where the scoundrel lay.

"Yes; by Jove! if I had my gun, I would have shot that dog within a half-hour after I first spoke to him. On the next morning after I came here I bound him lying on the island, very near the spot where I crawled out myself. I helped him on his feet, and Genevieve coming out with my hash,

shortly after, I gave him half—and you know that's no trifling sacrifice—and agreed that we would stand by each other if the Mohaves should find us out.

"Then, before telling him how I came here, I made him tell me how he came here. And," added Puff, growing red in the face, "he told me the whole thing; how you were received into his camp (I knew it was you the minute he began talking), how you were insulted, and how it was arranged that after you got sound asleep you were to be cast in the same pit through which I descended; but you having voluntarily given him your blanket, for his old dirty thing, he was mistaken for you and thrown down before they found the blunder. What became of you after, he couldn't tell, as he hadn't time to wait and see; but I knew you could take care of yourself, and so I was satisfied."

"But, when he told me with a grin on his infernal face, of his treacherous attempt to murder you, I fairly foamed at the mouth, and for a time couldn't do anything but puff; but when I got my breath, I just told him that it was only the grace of God that kept me from flying at him and tearing him to pieces.

"'You go over there,' said I, 'and if you ever come on my side of the island I'll kill you; you stay on your side and I'll let you alone, but I never want to see you again.'

"And there he's staid ever since," added Puff. "After I eat my meal, I turn about, go in, so that I cannot set eyes on him. He keeps his side of the house and I mine."

Wolcott was inclined to laugh, in spite of the tragic memories connected with the individual referred to.

"But there must be an end to this, Puff; did you never think or speculate upon what it was to be?"

"Lying there in abject idleness, most of the time, as I have been compelled to do, there was little occupation for me except to think; but, in all my schemes of the future, that man bore no part."

"I do not well see how we can disjoin him from our plans."

"I concluded to wait here several days until your arrival, and if you failed to come, then I would know that it was all over with you, and I should then ask Genevieve to help me out. She would have done it, rest assured."

"Has she never given you any idea of the way in which she and her friends reach the upper world, when they wish to do so?"

"I have not questioned her as closely as you seem to think. The fact is, she must incur some risk in befriending us as she does. It must require no little tact for her to get out meals to us without suspicion."

"I should suppose that the Mohaves would sometimes make a circuit of the island, and detect the presence of strangers here."

"If they had the slightest suspicion of visitors, they would undoubtedly do so, but we have all been particularly favored by Providence. My horse, which would have been certain to betray me, was kind enough to get drowned, and save all possibility of danger from that cause. The thick vegetation gives us secure shelter, and all we have to do is to keep dark. I must confess that more than once I have been tempted to steal forward and make a reconnaissance; but you know I am not so frisky on my feet as some folks, and I have been wise enough to keep within my sphere."

Wolcott was silent a few moments, and then he said:

"I must confess that there is something in this experience of ours that has a strange, almost supernatural look. This island under the ground—whichever heard of such a thing before? And then those four lodges yonder—how is it, that the Mohave Indians have made this their home—a place where there is no game, and nothing to engage one's self?"

"You have several erroneous ideas about this, Holmes. I have learned something regarding these things, from the object of your adoration. The four families that reside here are all leading ones among the Mohaves. The leader is a sort of subordinate chief, and these may be classed as his immediate adherents. His home, and the home indeed of all his companions, is up the river, at the village, which you say you visited. This subterranean island has been known to the Indians for years—and many of their prisoners have been kept here. The first year of Genevieve's captivity was almost entirely spent here. Her captors, knowing the rank and influence of her father, were fearful of an expedition to rescue her, and she was placed here for safety. But, as year after year passed without any such thing being done, their vigilance relaxed, and she is now permitted to go and come almost as much as she chooses."

"Do you know whether, during all this captivity, she has ever made an attempt to escape?"

"She told me that she tried it, about a year and a half after she came here. Believing the horse upon which she was mounted to be the fleetest of all, she made a bold dash for liberty, but she was pursued for over twenty miles and retaken. Since then, she has done nothing."

"Does she seem to be in despair?"

"I cannot say, as to that; she suspects her parents to be dead, and I presume is becoming reconciled to her lot, hard as it is."

"Hard! I should think it was; it must be a living death."

"You having arrived," added Puff, after a few moments of thought, "it is now in order that we arrange some plan for the restoration of the young lady to liberty."

"It seems to me that we cannot do much until

the matter is broached to her. Will she be not willing merely, but eager to escape?"

"When she learns that her parents are living, it cannot be otherwise. That has been the only trouble up to this point, and you can see that, under the circumstances, it was a mercy for her to be deceived."

"There is no use of ignoring that fellow over yonder," said Wolcott; "whatever arrangements we make, he must be remembered."

"If he were only a man that could be taken into our counsels, I have no doubt that we could form a party strong enough to take her away by main force, if we should select the proper moment. There are times when she is here, and there is no male Indian present, but there are certain to be enough squaws to make it useless for her to think of getting away unaided."

"You know they have learned that I am in the neighborhood."

"That puts a different face upon matters; they saw us both when we first observed their canoe going down-stream; they have met you afterward, and you proved to them that your errand here is to get their captive away from them, consequently they are certain to be on the look-out for us, and our labor is all the more difficult and dangerous."

"But it shall succeed!" exclaimed Wolcott, his face aglow with enthusiasm, kindled by his great love for the being of whom he knew so little. "I am determined, and something tells me that we cannot fail."

"Save your enthusiasm until it can do some good. We must fix upon some course of action; and we cannot do that till noon comes, and brings with it my dinner and—Genevieve."

Noon seemed a weary while coming, but it came at last, and with it opened the drama I now proceed to give.

CHAPTER XII.

FACE TO FACE.

It was near the hour of noon—a little past—when Genevieve started on her round as before; but this time she visited Baldy first. While she could not fail to contrast her two dependents, yet she knew no partiality in her hospitality.

True to his principles, Puffy withdrew from observation while this was going on, and then awaited her coming to him and his friend.

He and Wolcott were standing side by side, and she started back in surprise as she recognized the latter. Puffy introduced them, and added:

"If we keep on this way, Miss Genevieve, you will soon have a colony on your hands."

"I am ready to do what I can for those who are unfortunate, but I am sorry for all three of you."

"Why so?" asked Puff, with some alarm in his manner.

"I am afraid you will be detected here unless you escape pretty soon."

"And talking about escaping reminds me that my friend, Mr. Wolcott, has something important to say to you on that point."

And with this explanation, he withdrew beyond hearing, heedless of the protestations of both of those whom he left behind. So far as the young man was connected with this protest, it cannot be said that he was very vehement in its expression, nor that he experienced much misery at being left alone with Genevieve.

Left alone, however, he was, and courteously offered her a seat, placing himself at a respectful distance from her; and here in the shelter of the thick shrubbery, he introduced the all-important subject.

But Wolcott did not presume upon any fanciful or romantic regard between them. He regarded her as a pure-minded, intelligent lady, and acted with an ease and self-possession in the matter that was rather surprising to himself.

"Miss Mecheana, as I have been told your name is, without referring to the rather curious manner in which we last encountered, you will let me consider the present simply as it is. There are now three of us upon the island, depending for our daily food upon your kindness. Of course we cannot expect to remain here long; we are all desirous of leaving."

"I will do anything I can to assist you," she replied, in her low, sweet voice, looking down to the ground.

"I am sure of that; but I wish to ask a rather direct question. Are you not equally desirous with us of escaping?"

She was silent for a few moments, during which she showed a great deal of agitation, and the scarcely less distressed Wolcott saw the tears in her beautiful eyes.

"I hardly know what to answer," she finally faltered.

"Your home is in Los Angeles?"

"It was," she answered, in the same broken voice,

"but my home is now here, among the Indians."

"Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"None."

"You left parents behind you?"

"Yes; a dear father and mother."

"You surely wish to see them?"

"They must be dead," she said, her bosom heaving, and her emotion so overwhelming her that she covered her face and sobbed without restraint.

Wolcott waited until the tempest of her emotion had subsided, and then he addressed her tenderly and respectfully.

"But if they were living, of course you would be a thousand-fold more anxious to return."

"Oh, do not speak of it," she said; "they are dead; they must be; it is cruel to trifle with my feelings in this way."

"I have no wish to trifle with you," said the young man; "let me ask a favor of you, and you will then understand my purpose. Did you live in the city of Los Angeles, or in the suburbs of the place?"

"In the suburbs."

"Will you give me a brief description of your home, from which you were so rudely torn five years ago?"

In as few words as possible, Genevieve gave a brief outline of the place where her father dwelt when she lived with him. With a throbbing heart, Wolcott recognized it as the very place which had been visited by him and Puffy.

With an emotion hard to understand, he said:

"A few weeks ago, my friend Mr. Brown and myself called at your father's, saw and talked with him and your mother."

"What!" gasped Genevieve, her face blanching, as she turned her startled gaze upon him, "what is it you say?"

"Pray compose yourself."

And then he gave the particulars of the visit of himself and friend to the hacienda of Don Mecheana, and as she listened her heart was convinced; she recognized and believed.

"And now," added the young lover, with a glowing face, "I repeat my question; are you equally anxious with us to leave this place?"

"Oh, I can not remain here another day," she fairly moaned. "I will die, if I can not go to them."

These were the sentiments which her guest wished to hear. He understood how hateful, in the last few minutes, had become the society of the Mohaves; how much she loathed a residence among them, and how fully resolved she now was to leave them.

As Wolcott looked upon her beautiful face, in the demi-fairy-like light, and saw her eyes suffused and the crimson of her cheek, it was difficult for him to repress his admiration or to prevent himself giving some expression to his love.

But he did not forget himself. It would have been the height of meanness for him to intrude his emotions at such a time. Her whole heart was taken up with her love for her parents, and was he to thrust his own self between her and them in this sacred moment?

She now asked him a host of questions, relating to the appearance of her father and mother, their actions and ways, their health, and others, the most of which he was enabled to answer in a satisfactory manner.

She having finished, he took his turn.

"I have not yet learned the precise manner in which you and the Mohaves are accustomed to reach the upper world from this place."

"Overhead is a wood of scanty foliage," she replied; "that is why the light comes down to us, so subdued as to resemble moonlight. The wood extends a half mile, over the channel of the river, and at the lower point is where we make our ascent to the upper world."

"How?"

"There is a depression of the soil there, so that the surface is less than fifty feet above the water. We disembark upon a point of land, and then by means of ropes, made of bark, draw ourselves up out of the channel to the ground above."

"What do you do with your canoes?"

"They are always so light that they are easily drawn up after us, and carried over the ridge, and up a certain path to the village."

"It is curious that in my wanderings through the hills, and in this neighborhood, I have not discovered this trail, nor have I seen any of the Mohaves on their way to the village."

"That is not to be wondered at. They are very desirous of keeping the existence of this island a secret, and it is their purpose to make these trips back and forth during the night. Occasionally, but not often, we have gone down the stream, during the daytime, but we always return at night. The path, too, is so arranged that it is not likely to attract the notice of any one, even if it should be accidentally found."

"Can you not secure a canoe for us to-night, and in the darkness we can make our way to the place, and there await your coming?"

"It will be hard to get a boat for you, and then you know I have always companions; suppose they happen to be warriors?"

"There will be three of us; we can hurl them back again."

"We must succeed, if possible, without violence," was the reply. "I have witnessed so many scenes of violence, that I wish to see no more."

"If you can bring us a canoe at nightfall, I think the whole thing can be easily managed."

"If it can, it shall be done," she said, in a low, but deeply earnest voice. "I feel very different from what I did an hour ago."

"Be hopeful," he replied; "when I came down this Lost River, as we call it, I had no expectation of finding my friend here."

"Then why did you come?"

Ah! this was the question uttered in all innocence that the lover was longing for, and how promptly he answered:

"To save you."

Her eyes dropped and the crimson suffused her face. Her lips trembled, and she seemed on the point of uttering thanks, when Wolcott, with a self-sacrifice that was creditable to him, made the remark in the most matter-of-fact tone:

"I think I see a way by which the whole thing can be managed, without violence, and with a certainty of success."

"I hope so," responded Genevieve, as she rose to go.

"So soon?" he remarked in surprise, rising to his feet.

"I wish to create no reason for suspicion by my absence. I will see you again before we go. Good-by!"

Holmes Wolcott saluted her, and as she turned her dark, soulful eyes upon him, while moving away, was he mistaken in fancying there was a tender, tremulous light, the first spark of—*love?*

"Ah! I hope not!" he sighed, as he wheeled about to confront Puff Brown.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE UNANSWERED CALL.

ALL that long afternoon, Holmes Wolcott and Puffy Brown lay in the green vegetation of the mystic island, and when not sleeping they were discussing and forming their plan of escape for themselves and Genevieve Mecheana. Thus an abundance of time was given them to prepare for every possible contingency, and they at last fixed upon a course of action, which, so far as human calculation was concerned, promised success.

It necessarily involved considerable risk, and might be distasteful on that account; but, as it was, that could not be helped.

As Wolcott had remarked, it included the scoundrel Baldy in it. If he were left behind he would probably betray them; and, laying aside all questions of humanity, their own interests dictated the taking of him into their confidence until the entire party were at least above ground.

"You can explain the matter to him," said Puffy; "I sha'n't go near him."

Baldy had seen and recognized Wolcott before the latter approached him. The young hunter advanced unhesitatingly to where the scoundrel lay upon the ground, and chivalrously ignoring the past, said:

"I suppose you are as ready as we to leave this lonesome place?"

"Yes," was the sullen answer.

"We have made all our arrangements for getting away to-night after darkness sets in. To do this successfully, we need to stick together and work with one mind. Are you willing to agree to that?"

"I'll agree to anything to get out of this. If you folks ain't ready to-night I'm going to try it alone."

"If you prefer to go alone you can do so; but we invite you to make one of our company."

"I'll go with yer."

At which Wolcott walked back to where Puffy awaited him, and told his story, adding somewhat uneasily:

"What is to hinder him from floating down-stream at night, reaching the 'shaft,' and hauling himself up without our help?"

"There is too much risk in it; brave as I am, I wouldn't want to undertake it unless I had been over the thing before. You see it is dark as dark can be whenever it is night above. You ought to have seen it last night; but you couldn't have seen it, though you could have *felt* it."

"But he probably learned everything from Genevieve."

"Suppose he has; how is he to know when he reaches the place? I don't believe he has got the courage to undertake it, if there were lamps the whole distance to guide him."

"It may be," replied Wolcott, somewhat relieved, "but he is such an unconscionable villain, I believe he would stand in his own light for the purpose of doing both or either of us injury."

"You must recollect," said Puffy, with a laugh, "that the only time he ever did such a thing it was done involuntarily."

It was hardly dark when Genevieve made her appearance before the two friends, who were so full of their scheme that they had little appetite.

"I have secured a canoe, or shall be able to do so," said she, in answer to their questions. "They have little fear of me, when I start up-stream, for they know the current will not allow me to go far in that direction. But it will not be long before I am missed."

"How many are in the lodges?"

"There are three men, with their wives."

"Do they expect to spend the night here?"

"I think they do, but I can not be certain about it."

"This is the *only* boat here."

"If it were," replied she, with a sort of smile, "they would not permit me to have it in *my* power, even for a short time."

"Then we are to get by them without attracting their notice?"

"That seems to be the only course for us."

"Well, we shall be prepared. It is right, however, that I should tell you, Miss Mecheana," said Wolcott, "that, when we enter the canoe, it is with the resolve to escape. We have a gun and two revolvers in our possession, and we don't propose that they shall be kept merely for ornament."

"You do not mean to attack them?"

"Of course not; and we shall do all we can to keep out of their way; but if they pursue or press us, of course we shall use them."

"Yes," she replied, by way of assent. "I will come up the left bank; you had better come down as far as you dare to meet me; then we can hurry across the island with the boat, and if it is dark enough, start down the other side."

It was only fairly dark, when the three men stole down the left side of the island, until they were within a couple of hundred feet of the nearest lodge. Here, crouching in the grass, they awaited the coming of Genevieve.

She was not forgetful of her promise. In the course of half an hour, the darkness became so great, as to be utterly impenetrable, and, at the end

of that time, the soft ripple of the approaching canoe was heard.

All peered eagerly through the gloom, but could see nothing at all. By and by they heard the boat come to rest, within a few feet of them, and then the cautious whisper:

"Are you there?"

"Yes," replied Wolcott, rising to his feet, and reaching out his hand. "Take my hand."

Groping around in the darkness, his hand clasped hers.

"Now, the canoe is right at my feet."

Puff and Baldy stooped down and noiselessly lifted it from the water.

"If we only had a streak of light," growled the latter, "we might do sunkthin'."

Puff held the bow, and he the stern.

"Take my hand," said Wolcott to his friend, "and move carefully. I will hold yours, Genevieve, and you act as guide."

In this manner, the entire company were "linked" together, and began their stealthy march across the island.

They necessarily moved very slowly, as their fair guide was compelled literally to feel her way; but the strip of land was quite narrow, and in a few minutes they halted on the other shore.

The boat was set down in the water.

"Now," said Puffy, "why not let me make my way back and set the other canoe adrift? They will then be without any means of pursuit."

"No," replied the maiden, "they would be sure to detect and kill you; you would lose your way, and we should all be lost."

"You are commander-in-chief," replied the corpulent fellow, "and we will submit to your judgment; but that was a part of the plan decided upon by Holmes and me."

"How long before you will be missed?" inquired our hero.

"In less than twenty minutes. I will be called to, and if I fail to answer they will instantly start in pursuit. Had it not been so long a time since I have undertaken any thing like this, I would not have given even this poor opportunity, but I think they have come to believe I have given up all hopes of escape."

"Hello! they have a light in their lodges," remarked Puff, as he caught the glimmer from a couple of their habitations.

"What's the use of waiting here?" asked the sulky Baldy.

"We are losing precious time," said Genevieve. "Get in; I will take the paddle."

Puff seated himself in the bow, then came Baldy, then Wolcott, who hesitated to ask:

"Had I not better shove it off, after you enter?"

"No; the water is so deep that it doesn't need it."

In he went, and she followed. The next moment they were drifting with the current in utter darkness.

The faint lights, feebly glimmering from the lodges, were all the landmarks, and watching these, they saw they were moving quite slowly.

By and by, they knew they had floated by the island, and were going on down-stream. At this very moment, when the hearts of all were beating high with hope, they heard the voice of an Indian pronouncing something similar to:

"Wau-mou-ra! Wau-mou-ra!"

"What is that?" asked Wolcott, in no little alarm.

"It is my Mohave name," replied Genevieve; "they have missed me already and are calling me home."

"Dare you not answer?"

"If we were not below the island, I should do so; but, as it is, it would only tell them I am trying to get away."

Again they heard the call, twice repeated by the same voice as before, and then all was still.

"What now?" asked the young lover.

"They already suspect the truth; I must use the paddle, for they will pursue."

As she spoke, she dipped the oar in the current, while Puff spoke in an undertone:

"It looks as though there was going to be a fight; see that your weapons are ready, Holmes."

"They are, and so am I," was the answer.

CHAPTER XIV.

INTO THE SUNLIGHT AGAIN.

THE swiftness of the current increased each moment, and aided by the skillful paddling of Genevieve, the canoe sped down the stream like an arrow.

Several times, Wolcott and Puff asked the privilege of using it, but the maiden was too prudent to risk it in either of their hands.

On, on they went, rushing through the darkness, without a single point of light to guide them. The channel was narrow and deep again, and its windings had long since shut the glimmerings of the lodges from view.

All were listening for sounds of pursuit, but none were heard. If the Mohaves were really following them, it was with the noiseless stealth of the panther in stealing upon its prey.

"It seems to me, we are going very fast, by the help of the current and the skillful paddling of Gen—"

At that instant, the bow of the swiftly moving canoe struck the land, and Puff's words were cut short by his turning a complete summersault out of the boat upon the soft sand beyond, while the others barely escaped a similar violent handling.

"By Jove! that's what I call stopping rather suddenly," he muttered, as he picked himself up.

"I thought the landing-place was somewhere close at hand," remarked Genevieve, who in the darkness took the liberty of smiling.

"I may say there is no doubt about it; indeed, I am sure of it."

"I hope you are not hurt?"

"Only a little shaken up; that's all."

By this time all had landed.

"Is this where we make our entry into the upper world again?" inquired Wolcott.

"It is, and we must lose no time about it. I think the Mohaves will be here shortly."

By looking upward, the faint glimmer of a few stars could be discerned, and the least possible bit of moonlight found its way down to them, proving that there was an opening in the roof of the Lost River.

"I will set the canoe adrift, so they will not have that to guide them," said Genevieve, suiting the action to the word.

"Now," she added, "here are two ropes strong enough to hold the weight of us all. They are fastened to trees above, and up these we are to go!"

"Hand over hand?" inquired Puff, in dismay.

"Yes," was the reply, as she pushed one into his hand, and the other in that of Holmes Wolcott.

"Just think of it! I have got over two hundred avordupois, and I don't believe it can be done."

"Strengthen yourself by the knowledge that your life is depending upon it," said Wolcott.

"I will try, but I haven't much hope."

"Perhaps we can help you."

"Shall I lead the way?" asked Baldy, in his blandest voice.

"Scarcely," was the indignant reply of Wolcott.

"Genevieve goes first."

"Follow as fast as you can," said she, as, grasping the rope she began the ascent.

It was too dark for her figure to be seen, but Holmes held the lower part of the rope, and he knew by its peculiar tremor, that there was no difficulty with her, and she went up like an acrobat, and in a few seconds called down to them:

"I am safe; come on."

"You go next," said Puff to Wolcott.

The latter did not relish the thought of leaving his friend alone with the scoundrel.

But Puff was armed with his revolver, and if he received harm from the villain, the latter would have to expose his head to the revolver of Wolcott, in coming up, and he knew he would receive no mercy from that.

Hoping too that he might be able to give some assistance to his friend, the young man grasped the rope and began toiling upward, remarking as he did so to his companion:

"Understand, Puff, that you are to come next."

It was no easy task for Wolcott, lithe and muscular as he was; and, when he reached the top, he was pretty well used up. But he succeeded, and found himself in a sparse grove, through which the moonlight permeated, and which, coming from utter darkness as he did, seemed almost like daylight.

"Now, Puff," he called out, looking down, "come on."

The trembling of the rope showed that it was supporting the weight of another person.

"He is doing very well," remarked Wolcott, as he sat beside Genevieve; "much better than I expected."

"It seems very easy to me," she answered, in that soft sweet voice of hers.

"You have scarcely half his weight to carry, and are accustomed to it—hello! here is a head!—What does this mean?" demanded Wolcott, springing to his feet, and drawing his revolver, as he saw the shock head of the scoundrel Baldy. "Stop where you are, or I will blow your brains out!"

He paused, holding fast to the rope, with his head and shoulders visible, and growled:

"What do you want?"

"Where is Puff?"

"Down below."

"Why didn't he come first?"

"Coz he told me to do it."

Still unsatisfied, and grasping his revolver, Wolcott leaned over and called, down the shaft:

"Hello, Puff!"

"Well, what is it?" came back the cheery voice of the good fellow.

"Why did you not come up next to me?"

"I told this fellow to go on and get out of the way; it's all right."

"Come on, then," said Wolcott, stepping back and permitting the man to emerge from the place. The next instant Baldy was on *terra firma*.

"Now," said the young man, "we will let Puff fasten the rope around him, and then we can draw him out."

"I'd like to see me do it," growled Baldy, with a fearful curse. "I

ness, and in a fever of apprehension for the fate of his friend.

"I haven't an ounce of strength left; I shall have to drop back again. Maybe if I can practice for a few days, I shall be able to do it, by the end of the week."

At this instant, the strained ear of Genevieve caught the ripple of a paddle. She knew what that meant!

"You must come," she called out; "the Mohaves are upon us!"

Puff had heard the same sound accompanied by a guttural exclamation, that told him the Indians were beneath him.

It now became indeed a matter of life and death. It is scarcely possible to tell what this frame of ours is capable of doing when put to its utmost. The sudden certainty that the red-skins were within a score of feet, gave Puff a tremendous amount of strength, and his upward progress was resumed with a vigor that speedily brought his moonlike face to view.

"Good fellow!" exclaimed the delighted Wolcott, catching his outstretched hand and tugging manfully at him—"you have done nobly!"

Another strong effort, and Puff lay like a porpoise upon the ground, too exhausted to move, and he could only feebly articulate:

"Let me alone till I rest. I must puff a little."

And now the ears of Wolcott detected a sound, which told him that several persons were coming up the ropes.

"They are the Mohaves!" exclaimed Genevieve; "what shall we do?"

Wolcott whipped out his revolver again.

"I will shoot them as their heads come in view."

But her quick wit had already devised a better scheme. Taking the Indian knife, which she always carried with her, she cut the rope in a twinkling, and the baffled Mohaves dropped back to the bottom, their means of pursuit gone.

"Look out! they will fire!" she admonished, catching the arms of Wolcott, and drawing him back, beside the puffing form of their companion.

The warning was not an instant too soon. Several muffled reports came up from the shaft, from the malignant and disappointed savages.

"Let me discharge my revolver down there," said Wolcott, creeping toward the opening; "it is no more than right that I should return the compliment."

But she arrested the movement.

"No, I do not wish it."

The sound of the firearms aroused Puff, who, rising to the sitting position, demanded what it all meant. When he had learned, he added:

"It's my opinion we had better get out of these parts as fast as we can travel. Now, which way shall we go?"

"I have a horse concealed somewhere in this neighborhood; but I am afraid I am too much of a stranger to find him at night."

The three moved through the wood, until they stood on the margin of the prairie. Wolcott looked about him, but could see nothing that looked familiar. The channel of the Lost River seemed to make a long sweeping bend, so that the three were already on the western side of the ridge, over which the young explorer had been chased by the miners of Baldy.

The strip of prairie in front of them was so narrow, that they could easily see the timber beyond.

"Two miles through that," said Genevieve, pointing toward the dark line, "and then across the river, and we shall be in the Mohave village."

"Then my horse can be at no great distance."

A long consultation was now held as to the proper course for them to pursue. The object of all was to reach Los Angeles as soon as possible. If well mounted, this could be done in three days; afoot it would require fully a week.

There seemed no possibility of obtaining more than one horse, and that was not likely to be found before morning. They had very few firearms with them, so that the journey to Los Angeles might well be looked upon with the soberest apprehension.

It was not likely that the Mohaves left behind would find any means of reaching the outside world under twenty-four hours at the furthest, so that little was to be feared from them.

Baldy had gone away with a threat upon his tongue. He would doubtless manage to unite with his gang during the coming day, and then the bloodiest savage was not to be feared more than he and his lawless followers.

There really appeared but one course left the three; and that was to hunt up the mustang of Holmes Wolcott, and start westward at once.

From the description of the locality, Genevieve was able to locate the place where he had left him—a point about a mile distant, toward which they moved at once.

When it was reached, Wolcott was not sure it was the right place, but he was sure there was no horse to be seen; but all went to searching with might and main, and at the end of a couple of hours, Puff came near breaking his neck from pitching over the prostrate form of the mustang, within a rod of where they began to look for him.

Then Wolcott managed, without trouble, to find his trappings, and the journey was begun.

Until daylight they progressed slowly through the hills and ridges, and, just as it was growing light in the east, they found themselves upon the margin of a sterile, sandy plain.

Here the foresight of Genevieve became manifest, when her two friends saw in her possession the bundle of food, so much larger than usual, that they saw with proper economy it would last them several days.

Hitherto all had walked. Now the gentlemen insisted that Genevieve should mount upon the saddle which had been fixed for her accommodation; but she peremptorily refused.

"Why should I do so, when I am not tired and can outwalk both of you?"

"I am not prepared to admit that," replied Wolcott, with a laugh.

"We will test it," was the confident reply.

But poor Puff did not dare to dispute her assertion, and, as he really needed assistance, he was finally persuaded to mount the horse and take a ride.

In this fashion the journey was continued until noon, when Holmes Wolcott remarked in the most indifferent manner he could assume:

"I have no doubt the horse is tired; suppose we give him an hour's rest?"

"There is no shade or water here; let us press on a few miles further," responded Genevieve, without checking her gait.

"How many miles further?" asked Wolcott, beginning to lag.

"A dozen or so, I should say; why are you so anxious to know?"

"I may as well own up that it is I who am worn out, and who need the rest so badly," returned the young hunter, with a laugh that had some weariness in it.

"Then why have you not exchanged places with me?" indignantly demanded Puff. "I have asked you both at least a dozen times, and I am absolutely tired of sitting in this saddle."

"When I am weary, I shall claim my right to ride," said Genevieve. "I have no wish to do so now; if I mount no good will be done, as Mr. Wolcott is so tired that he *must* rest; so let him rest in the saddle, as we are so anxious to get forward."

This was prudent, and it was done.

A dozen miles further, and the signs indicated that they were approaching a more fertile region. Finding grass and water, a two hours' halt was made, and when it was beginning to grow dark, they made their halt for the night.

Not a sign of a living person outside of their own party was seen during the first day's travel, from which they took much hope and courage.

The second day's travel was begun at an early hour, and continued with little intermission during the entire day. Several parties of Indians were discerned in the distance, but they were skillfully avoided, and there was no reason to believe that any of them belonged to the Mohave village from which the maiden was fleeing.

When the company went into camp on the second night, the white peaks of the Coast Range were to be seen in the western horizon. Thus they were rapidly drawing near Los Angeles, which, however, was still a goodly distance from them.

As they advanced, the signs of civilization increased, and the third and fourth day were occupied in passing through the broad, open pass, to the south-east of Los Angeles, and they henceforth were traveling on the western slope, having placed the greater part of their danger behind.

Nothing as yet had been seen of the village Mohaves, or Baldy and his men. They were the parties most to be feared, and it was known by all that, if they got on the track of the party, they would never give up pursuing them, so long as there was an earthly chance of overtaking them.

Puffy was really the most helpless one of the party, and he did the most horseback-riding. Thus occupying the most elevated position of them all, and being gifted with a good vision, it devolved upon him to act the part of sentinel, and, at such times Wolcott and Genevieve lingered behind, holding sweet converse, and their thousand glances telling the tale of love between them—although the words remained unspoken.

Los Angeles was at length reached, and the long-lost daughter, Genevieve—long, long ago given up as dead—was in the arms of her parents, who were wild with joy.

Reunited at last, after such a dreary—such a cruel separation, Holmes Wolcott withdrew from the sacred scene, determined, however, to make his appearance again.

From Los Angeles, Puff and Wolcott found transportation home, where they rejoined their old friends. It was not strange, however, if in a month the young adventurer returned to the City of the Angels, where he was received with a kindness and cordiality that showed how deep and lasting was the gratitude of parents and daughter for the part he had played in the rescue of the latter.

The father of Genevieve had for two years made every effort to regain his daughter, but failing utterly to obtain the least trace of her, had been compelled to believe that she was dead. We shall not attempt to picture the joy of her return; it must be left to the imagination of the reader.

While Holmes Wolcott was in this city, three men, wounded and sick, rode into the place, and were taken care of by the authorities. They stated that they were the only survivors of the party of the scoundrel Baldy. The latter had rejoined them, "to fall a few days after in a desperate fight w' the Mohaves, who had already killed half of the in a previous encounter.

Under the golden sunlight, or in the soft shade of the hacienda of Don Mecheana, Holmes Wolcott finished his wooing of the beautiful Genevieve, whose parents, unwilling to lose their loved daughter again, gained a son whom they regard with scarcely less pride and affection than she so long lost and so strangely restored to them after the lapse of many years.

THE END.

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